The Shape of Shadows

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The Shape of Shadows

by Artblart

Summary

An alternate universe where Will and Hannibal cross paths very early in their lives. Everything is different but somehow, things still find themselves to be very much the same. Whether by fate or by coincidence, these two boys will collide, premature and unknowing, without so much as a thought to the consequences following the wake of their destructive and passionate friendship.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Becoming

It's difficult for me, he thinks, as he sits in the waiting room. He doesn't feel comfortable doing this, despite having mulled it over a million times, rolled it in his hands like putty and molded it to fit in a sensible way in his brain. It's difficult for me, he thinks, to open a gate in my mind that's been rusted closed for so long.

He imagines it to be the garden gate to the back of, what he likes to call, his mind cabin. Understandably, he hasn't lived long enough to have a gate so rusted as he imagines now, but he can only express to himself the imagery of his tears and the sweat from his nightmares eroding the gate and quenching the thirst of the overgrowth there. Will stands in front of his gate, in the quiet of the abandoned garden and swallows back. He reaches for it...grasping the Saturn-dusted bars before a loud voice interrupts his thought, addressing him formerly.

"Mr.Graham, Dr. Alana Bloom is ready for you."

Will Graham, age 14, blinks with an unsteady breath and skittering eyes. The office attendant is clean and homie. Will sees book club parties, a messy divorce and two kids in high school that have teeth and noses just like her ex-husband.

"Don't be afraid, Mr.Graham. She's very nice and she's new to our district to. Might give you a nice change of pace." The woman adds as she gently pushes him into Alana's main office and is then left alone with her.

His hands curl at his sides as he stands near a chair. He doesn't like being here already. The room is too warm, with its nautical and beach theme decor. It's like something out of one of the magazines his dad scoffed at every time they went to the gas station for oil rags and left over engine screws on discount. He gulps, and he won't attempt to make eye contact but he studies the outline of Dr. Bloom and her momentarily turned down face. Her brown hair is the color of dark almonds, and her skin is clear, and powdery with a hint of life, like a Renaissance painting he saw in a book once. She's writing the last of a notation before she looks up with a smile more genuine than he's ever had the pleasure of experiencing first hand.

"Good morning, Will. Please, have a seat," Dr. Bloom says with the same warm ness, "I understand this might be difficult for you. It usually is for students, especially if they don't have the support of their parents in therapy."

Will Graham grabs hold of the chair in hopes of receiving emotional support rather than a physical one. He sits slowly. He's staring past Dr. Bloom, past the inspirational posters, the degrees and the yellow walls....He can almost see his dad at work in the boat yards with a cigarette in his hands. He's staring down at one of those magazines he scoffs at at the gas station. Will sees himself in the pages and realizes he's not scoffing at decor.

"Will?" She urges.

Will blinks again, "H-how did you know my pa didn't send me here?"

“Because I had one of your teachers call and inquire about you and your father very happily told Mrs. Katz some unpleasantries I won’t care to repeat.”

Will winces. His father didn’t believe in therapy, or expressing ones self, or feeling deeper emotions outside of anger for the bureaucrats, and pride for the baseball team. He can practically hear his dad in the room, sitting in the twin chair, preaching, “No son of mine needs any of your brainy who-ha. He should be a MAN, strong enough to deal with his own demons, or god damn him!”

“Will, it’s alright. This isn’t about your father. Any and all actions your father make are squarely on his shoulders, not yours. This is about you. Tell me, if you know, what do you plan to accomplish by taking therapy with me?” She picks up a pen discreetly.

Will doesn’t know the answer, “You won’t tell him I came, will you?”

“Nothing escapes what’s outside of these four walls unless you want it to. The only time I might ask for outside assistance is if you disclose something that might be damaging to yourself or to the students around you.” Dr. Bloom states reassuringly, with a tone of certainty that Graham would never go that far.

Will only relaxes slightly, but any comfort was more welcomed than none. Then he thought about the previous question for a moment. Why did I come here? What do I want? Only one thing comes to mind coherently that he’s thought about more than once.

“I...want to feel...normal...”

“What does normal mean to you?”

Will sucks in a breath and opens the garden gate within his mind, and remembers one grey day in May. His dad woke him up before the sun, and said in a tired tone that he was taking him to the boat yard today. A pile of engine orders came in the day before, and his hands would be needed to build the underside. He could be faster and more precise with the small screw and bolt arrangements compared to his father who had large, square and calloused hands.

His back cracks in sections as he gets out of bed and goes about picking a shirt up off the floor to wear. He smells the coffee and the toast. His dad doesn’t really know how to cook so he lives on a staple diet of toast or cereal and sandwiches with the occasional free fruit left over from the cafeteria at school. The toast is a welcomed normality in the morning and it’s easy on his stomach. His kitchen is old fashioned and cheap, noted every time he walks into it, but it’s his favorite space in the house aside from his bedroom.

His dad drinks the last of his coffee and throws his head towards the door. The sun is just starting over the horizon, so it’s time to go. They climb into the old green Ford and Will from the corner of his eye watches his dad put the key in the ignition and starts the engine. He likes watching the car come to life, and hear the radio suddenly tune in to something appropriate for the mood. His dad does to, judging by the whistling emanating from him. The drive is short to the harbor and as they enter the lot to park the car, another car passes them hauling a beautiful boat.

His dad pats his arm with the back of his hand to grab his attention, “Look there boy, it’s a miniature of the American schooner, Elena. The real one is 55 meters long and can out sail the cream of the American schooners. Beauty, she is. The guy who owns that little copy must sure have more than two pennies to rub together, that’s for sure.”

Will can’t help but scrunch his nose at the fact that his dad sounded like he regurgitated a documentary blurb he’d been holding in for just this moment. His eyes sparkle nonetheless, as it hauls past to the entrance of the launch point. Will and his father weren’t going anywhere near the water today. His dad whistles for him to get out of car, and follow him to the boat yards. As he stares at his dads back, the smell of cigarette, oil and metal wafts past him. The fellow mechanics wave or holler in greeting from their stations because they’re use to having him around the boat yards on weekends.

“Ey, ‘Oward. Brought yer boy along again? Jay just stacked on two mer of’m on this mornin’. If yer gunna get outta here bah 5, bes start werkin’ soon.” A close work mate informs him, shaking his hand and then adjusting his bruised hat.

His dads eyebrows raise a hair before nodding and leading them both to their usual work place. Will can’t help but puff out his chest just a tad, ready to uphold the task ahead. His dad was always different at work. His dad called him his boy, was relatively quiet, and from time to time would slip from his usual demeanor and either ruffle Will’s hair or pat his arm when he was being efficient. It felt normal. Working with his hands, getting dirty and having a thin sheen of sweat form on his brow as the day passes helps keep his brain from over-cooking under his dad’s ever judgmental gaze.

They were on their fourth motor of the day when they break for lunch and Will sits by himself with a peanut butter sandwich. His dad goes to make nice with his coworkers...probably all scoffing at magazines.

He remembers these days because he feels nothing. He feels no fear, no anxiety, and no impending dooms from his father or his own haunting mind. His mind is quiet, cataloging the trees and the birds and the boats sailing away in the distance. He busies himself with dissecting his own opinions about his sandwich—whether he really likes that there’s more peanut butter than jelly or if he’d like more jelly next time. Life feels simple and he’s comforted by it. Will closes his eyes and tries to listen for the ocean but he can’t hear it at all. He only hears the silent click of a pen and the end of a notation.

He opens his eyes and Dr. Bloom is staring at him expectantly.

“That...that’s it,” Will mumbles, never making eye contact.

“It’s a nice way to visualize normalacy. The want to be looked at as nothing more than a good son. There’s no muddying emotions or underlying turmoils masked by facades. We all crave that nonjudgmental and uncomplicated relationship. We expect and crave it from our parents. Simple means there’s no conflicting feelings or ideas that can loosen our grasp from what we know to be true. Gray areas can scare us because they can be cloudy and mysterious to us in times of instability. Are you scared, Will?” Dr. Bloom retorts.

Will turned his head to the side again, to the twin chair. His father is quiet in his mind. His father stares directly at him.

“Are you scared, Will?” His father repeats at last, with a hint of impending violence in his voice.

Will swallows and grips the chair arm.

The day is ending and the boy sitting near the window, at his desk, seems to enjoy the changing of the sky. He’s been inside all day, studying Dante in Latin as a pass time pleasure along with his other extracurricular studies. This pecan brown-blonde haired boy turns the page and as he reads and translates, his vision slows and so does his writing. He begins to read the passage more carefully and as he goes further down the page, he finds a lump in his throat and closes his book faster than one would swat a fly.

The boy has been without incident since he came to live with Aunt Murasaki. No dreams, no screams in the night, and no seeing faces in the mirror when he goes to check his foggy reflection. He tries to wrestle away the thoughts and tastes of smoke, and flesh. Very nearly pulling his hair from his head, he has to stand and press his palms so hard into his eye sockets, he sees red. His brain begs for it all not to start again.

The heat at his toes and the distant screams of the damned grow with in him. He closes his book just as Dante discovers in shock and utter horror the sinner Ugolino, feasting on the head of Archbishop Ruggieri. His eternal meal and eternal punishment for cannibalizing his sons in prison when Ruggieri, betrayer to his country, sentenced them to a cell to starve to death.

The boy doesn’t want to remember nor does he want to see his face stitched into the head of Ugolino, feasting on the head of the horrid Vladis Grutas. The boy is shaking now and has to get up. He has to go look for Ms. Murasaki and ask for guidance or it will plague him for days. He’s soured and disappointed in himself for this weakness.

They’re home in Lithuania is vast and it is filled with many memories, mainly, of his sister. Even though his sister has never seen any of these halls, he still hears her giggles echo and from the corner of his eye he sees the beautiful blonde head that she has, peek around the corner beckoning him to follow her to dead ends and untouched bedrooms.

The boy has to stop mid step, and place a palm on the wall as he tries to control a sob and a gag from escaping his throat. It’s an involuntary habit he picked up that came along with his memories of Mischa. He finds it repulsive and weak, but his throat closes up and his stomach does rolls that can’t be bothered to be stopped by his mind. As memories and experiences from his past flood into him, he suffocates on his own tears. He hears a voice from behind him, unsure if it’s from amongst the living, but tries anyway to conceal his weakness by stamping it down and strangling it with brute force of mind.

“(Hannibal, sir, please. It’s alright. Don’t hold it in, it can only be bad for you.)” the girl says in Japanese to him.

“It hurts, Chiyoh. It still hurts,” Hannibal admits, digging nails into his chest.

“(The beast is wounded but it’s hunger is never satisfied for long. You must be strong enough to satisfy its hunger when the pain becomes too much. Your sorrow leaves you open to sickness. Ms. Murasaki will help you, come, she is in the main living quarter,)” Chiyoh reassuringly states, guiding her charge to where Ms. Murasaki resides for the evening until dinner time.

The main living quarter is Japanese themed in its dark woods and furnishings. The colors are all deep emeralds, ruby reds and golds or silvers at the hems of all fabrics and carpeting. To Hannibal, the contrast of colors to their darker shadows all ran wild through his mind, making faces and figures all around him like the never ending rows of demons scrutinizing gleefully at the sinners in The Inferno. He gripped Chiyoh as he was brought before his Aunt. Hannibal couldn’t hear what was said, but all he can piece together is that he’s having some form of severe panic attack. He’s made to sit in front of a tea table, and a bowl of mushrooms mixed with chopped herbs sails along the table at his right. It suddenly smells of Japanese root, ginger, and something bittersweet. Somewhere in the distance, as Hannibal’s mind carries him away to darker places and locking him behind bars, he can hear a voice.

“Nakama. Remember nakama and you will heal. Anger, guilt and fear has sickened you. You remember your sorrows and your taker of life. You must take it back, Hannibal. Drink this, and you will begin to see what you must become to rid yourself of this pain.” the voice of Aunt Murasaki says, calm and wise.

Hannibal sees swirls in the tea they place before him. What seems to be a dark oil in it, looks like blood in the dim light and he can smell the burning of bone. He wonders in that moment if it’s his heart filling his nostrils with smoke, begging him to burn his enemies. He drinks the tea, and swallows down what he might deem the beginning to his becoming. The liquid runs hot down his throat and fuels the embers in his stomach. Within moments, he can already feel himself arriving upon a lucid moment. The feeling is akin to taking a parachute and stuffing it back into its tiny parcel in one fierce shove. Hannibal blinks, and only he sees himself exhale smoke.

“How do you feel?” Aunt Murasaki inquires, pouring him another small cup of the tea, with a dab of the bloody oil after it.

Chiyoh is nowhere to be found, and Hannibal is almost glad for it. He knows she’s watching from a dark corner, but her presences reminds him of his love for Mischa.

He clears his throat, “Better. I must apologize for this. I wouldn’t have interrupted you until dinner but...”

Auntie holds up her hand, she will hear no more, “There is no measure of time that can fit the healing of your wounds. They may never heal, and even if they do, they will never heal correctly. One must come to terms with these things. You are trying to run with still an arrow through your skin.”

Hannibal takes another drink of his tea. He’s beginning to feel warm at the finger tips and his body seems loose in his seat. The faces have gone but the shuffling of shadows still lingers

near. They aren't frightening or even unsettling, they're just present, living amongst their conversation.

"What have you given me?" Hannibal finally questions, having never had this drink before.

"The Mazatec people believe that the psilocybe and amanita muscaria are the key to unlocking ones soul. I do not believe you are old enough for such a journey, but what I believe and what you need are very different as of right now," She states, refilling his cup a third time.

Hannibal stares down at his cup, "You gave me a drug..."

"Indeed. Merely to assist you in your journey. I will be aiding you from the outside, but this journey you must take all your own. When you awake, you will be a new man, and I will teach you anything you need to know."

It was almost comedic how her words started to melt, and as he looked at her face, the lipstick she wore seemed that much brighter. Her ruby lips almost seemed to slip off her face, and want to fly away with the cranes on her kimono. His eyes wandered and wandered about the room. He looked everywhere and finds himself feeling like he is looking at himself from the outside. He sees his own face, flustering and far away, thinking about nothing and everything. He thinks back to the oil in his drink, and how it swirled like koi fish in a pond. The pond breaks before him and the koi fish go splattering across the ceiling.

"Auntie, where does the difference between the past and the future begin? Science has yet to distinguish the two yet here we are, with two points in space that can never run backward."

"It's the natural order of things, Hannibal. They can never run backward because disorder creates our line of existence, a sequence of ever unfolding events."

Hannibal snags on the thought, like catching a piece of paper in the wind, in a storm of shredded thoughts. His voice echoes around him as he watches colors dance while a part of him joins the shuffling shadows. Hannibal stands with Mischa, away from his still body as if he has two points of view. He looks at Mischa's whole face for the first time in years.

"An increase of disorder, entropy, distinguishes the past and the future. If I break my teacup, can't it come back together some way? I read in an article recently that there is always a percentage that entropy can decrease and therefore reverse its effects on an object...or in my case, an event. I wish it could. With less disorder...if I can control it...I can have my teacup back."

He sees his teacup, with hazel eyes and blonde hair. She has soft and pure skin, and she looks innocently up at him. Hannibal reaches for her, and she falls away like shards of a broken teacup, only giggles following after her. The smell of bones wafts through the room, and he watches as his body spews smoke. He tastes it in his mouth and laughs at the cranes that form from the rising wisps.

Hannibal knows he's burning away on the inside but can't bother to jump up or roll over to put the fire out. God is allowing Murasaki and allowing him to hollow out his skin and put a

new thing inside to see what they'll do next. He realizes in that moment, he is being born again as God, and in Gods image. To enjoy Gods work and revel in the powers that he has bestowed upon himself is what God enjoys and wants to see. There are tears falling from his eyes like stars, and turning to steam as he is being remade. God reaches for him, and whispers in his ear the reckoning he is being allowed.

"I am frightened."

"Of?"

"Not of...but For. I am frightened *for them*."

Behind Closed Eyes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal awakes amongst pillows and his goose down comforter. He's stripped to nothing but a pair of briefs and doesn't remember how he got into bed or where his clothes went. None of that matters now, but it's a chasing thought he has as he lays still, staring at the ceiling. He exhales deeply, and can't help putting his hands to his own chest to feel his heart beat. The opportunity of living after having had the experience he had seems almost like a miracle, a precious treasure given by God. With this amazing gift he can look upon his world like He intends him to. He wishes he could have seen and become, what he will soon discover, without having to sacrifice anything....but there is always a price for power. Poor Mischa, he laments momentarily. Hannibal closes his eyes momentarily and sees himself in a blue and green suit, fixing a cuff and pausing before an open door with Mischa on the other side.

"I don't expect to be seeing you again anytime soon. I've been given a second chance at understanding my place in this world. I cannot cry for you anymore...This is my good bye," He says quietly.

Mischa doesn't respond and goes about playing with wooden bricks on a carpet whilst humming a tune that is suppose to be familiar. He doesn't wait for any sort of response, for he knows he won't get one, and closes another door in his ever expanding mind palace. There are no tears when he leaves, he believes he's too strong for them now.

He wriggles amongst the sheets like trying to adjust himself in a new suit. The real and new Hannibal hides with in the fabric and peeks between the stitchings, observing the vibrant world present before him. He opens his eyes and doesn't think about Mischa again. He thinks about finishing Dante and how he should go looking for Aunt Murasaki. He remembers inklings from last night, words, like shards of ceramic trying to be glued back together but they're all ill-fitting. Sick, becoming, journey, weak, teach you, awake....

"It's time to face the sun....and blossom," He whispers, emulating what He had whispered in his ear the night before.

It's noon by the time Hannibal gathers enough energy to get up and shower, dress himself in suitable attire and go hunting for his Aunt a second time. He enters the same living quarter as before but the room is dark and quite empty. The candles haven't been lit for some time and none of the house hands are present in the area. He must look elsewhere...perhaps the stables or the courtyard. Hannibal likes the stables and the horses but doesn't go very often himself. The prospects of getting dirty are high and he detests hay or dust-covered clothing. Aunt Murasaki enjoys the company of the horses, they remind her of Hannibal's late uncle with their strength and brilliance, yet peculiar humbleness and quiet nature. As he walks hallway after hallway, and down several stone or marvel staircases, he finds himself at the large doorway leading to the stable trail. Footmen are at the entrance ready to bow politely before opening the wide mahogany doors, allowing him passage.

The air is fresh against his face and is a relief to his lungs. It feels like jumping into a lake after sun bathing for just a tad too long. Hannibal even has to run fingers through his hair hoping it'd release more heat from his body as he walks briskly along the stone path. The air is quiet with the exception of the pine and maples swaying gently in unison with Hannibal's gentle footfalls amongst stones and drier grass. As he nears his destination, the horses are audible. Someone is preparing to ride, he notes, from the excited way the horses seem to be moving in their pens waiting to be selected. Entering the side door and peering down the stable main entry way, he sees a horse handler readying a horse for someone small in stature. The saddle is an elegant velvet leather with a custom design imprinted along the brim of running stags and cherry blossoms. Aunt Murasaki is the only one allowed to use that particular saddle and so, he enters the stable fully. Puffing out his chest slightly, and straightening his spine, he walks toward the handler with a newer confidence he has yet to show anyone in his new, old world.

In their native tongue, "(Handler, where is my Aunt? Is she near by?)"

It startled the handler into response, "(Ah, M-Master L-Lecter. She is enjoying the fresh bloom of apricots on the other side of the stable. I am suppose to get her when the horse is ready.)"

"Thank you. Ready a horse for me as well, I'll ride with her," Hannibal states, and leaves the handler as he bows automatically, and goes to fetch another set of gear.

The apricots on the property are divine to say the least. Hannibal isn't accustomed to eating much out of his standard 2- 3 small meals a day (that Murasaki forces him to eat). So long he's hidden his fears and regrets behind more subtle habits like this, preference to not eat as often, the gagging, and using his more clinical outlook on everything around him when not alone. It protected him at the time, he supposes, but he knows now he must be stronger than any of those habits. He has to smile slightly—he remembers in the past, how he actively avoided the apricots when in season because he knew he could never say no to them. He craves the apricot now with a salivation almost animalistic. Usually they're always served room temperature, only eaten soft and with a little give in the meat so every bite must be gentle, followed by a delicious slice of homemade cranberry Brie with a honey and brandy drizzle.

Hannibal steps out amongst the apricot trees in full bloom, he purposefully makes his presence known by stepping on a dry branch. His Aunt turns, her radiance in the partial sun is memorable to say the least, and Hannibal can't help but completely soften amongst the apricots.

"I knew you would wake before I set off on a noon trail. Come, nephew," She beckons and continues walking amongst the apricot trees with their low bearing fruit.

He strolls after her, looking up at the apricots and breathing in their sweet scent. One of his many practices is to try and indicate the ripest of fruits by smell alone. He's gotten better at it in the past couple of years and now, this practice is merely a fun exercise. He deliberates as he passes many fruit and as he nears his slow walking Aunt, picks two. At their very touch, he can tell they're perfect. His smile is small and to himself.

“Are we going to discuss what occurred last night?” Hannibal speaks, examining the fruit for any impurities despite knowing there are none.

“Only if you would like to. My only hope is that what you have seen, has helped you piece together part of your future. The future none of us want, but the one you must take,” She says, almost solemnly, like someone whispering after a funeral service.

“So you know? Why provoke me? Why let me?” He questions, following the same tone.

“I only know that for my own sake and for my nephews, I finally buried him yesterday. It was the body’s choice to come back up and host something new.”

The grounds are wet near the roots of the trees, and a small puddle is passed over. Hannibal saw a glimpse of himself in it and only saw a blue figure, thin and feeble, starving.

“The body’s choice. God’s choice”

“...your choice,” She intervenes, looking at him for only a moment before looking up at the apricots with him, sighing, “And, I didn’t let you do anything, you simply happened and I dared to care. I thought in the very least, I could teach you to be surrounded by loved ones behind mind’s eyes. It was the only way I could think of to comfort you. I cannot lie, it’s hard to see you walk away from me...alone, for what perhaps might be forever. My only wish for you is to some day find peace and understanding.”

“But I’m not alone. I have you. I don’t need anyone else.” Hannibal tried, but knows the truth, and so does Murasaki.

There’s a silence between them. Hannibal gently rubs the skin of the apricots on his dark shirt before pulling out a pocket knife that belonged to his father. It’s a silver blade and accent with a wooden handle that emulates the French Rococo architectural style of leaf and vine fresco. Hannibal carries it everywhere with him since first discovering it hidden away in the cellar when he first arrived at his aunt’s home. He takes his father’s blade, and cuts the apricots into symmetrical halves. Offering a halve to his aunt free of the pit, she takes it and has to close her eyes as she takes the first bite. Murasaki knows the sweetness so well and it makes her miss her husband even more. Her nephew can see it in her face and he enjoys their equal moment of reminiscing.

“What will you have me do now?” Hannibal asks further finally.

“Your father and your uncle traveled far and wide to discover and learn many things for themselves—to become the refined, Renaissance men that they were. Start backwards and find a new home for your skin, in a place that won’t be noticed, then....retreat, until you are worthy of your place. Once you have stepped foot back into Europe, I will leave a trail of teachers for you.”

“My father and uncle attended university at John Hopkins, in Baltimore after attending boarding school in Europe,” He replies, the sudden sense of purpose hitting him over the head like a falling object.

The charted journey made sense. Hannibal knows he'll make his own adjustments along the way to tailor to his wants and needs but Baltimore sounds like a wonderfully dull place to reside and hide. He can already see the man he wants to become unfolding and folding before him like origami. He's never been to America but he knows English fluently, and can go waltz in the social climate there before making his way back to Europe for boarding school. Aunt Murasaki merely nods and turns when a third set of feet come upon them. The handler, hesitant in interrupting them, announces the horses are ready for them, bows and leaves almost in the same breath.

"After you, auntie." He says, smiling behind the stitching and swallowing the rest of the apricots.

A couple months later.....

"I will miss our games of chess and fireplace burnings when you're gone. I still think you shouldn't go," Chiyoh says in a small voice, handing Hannibal a small suitcase that belongs to a 6 piece luggage set that will travel with him across Europe to Baltimore.

"As will I, Chiyoh and I must go. Please take good care of Aunt Murasaki while I'm gone," He says, like a father to his wide eyed and tearful daughter that doesn't quite understand why he must go.

Hannibal is traveling by train across Europe. He prefers to see all he can of Europe before crossing the ocean to America and then inevitably placing himself in boarding school for the duration of the rest of his childhood. He wants to be able to recount all he's seen by memory so when he can't freely go to those places, they're easily accessible in his mind palace. He pulls out a map and list of tickets and train numbers as he turns to get into the sleek, black Rolls Royce that's waiting to get him to the train station an hour and a half away.

"Auntie has become very weak and needs your support. The doctors have been saying she might not make it past the next season. You will write to me of her well-being?"

Chiyoh can't help but plea a little, "That's why you shouldn't go! She is nakama...I live to protect her and love her and so should you, like with Misch..."

"Don't speak her name. Just say you'll do it, Chiyoh. I've already explained why I must go. I wish it were under better circumstances, but there is no delaying my trip any further," He states with only a hint of controlled regret in his voice.

Chiyoh nods solemnly, and watches as he steps into the car, and the driver shuts the door neatly behind him. Hannibal rolls down the window and finally looks at Chiyoh one last time.

"Life isn't about finding yourself, it's about creating yourself. I know this now and so does Auntie. It can be painful at times, but you understand, don't you? And when I return, I will

help you create who you are and maybe then, you'll look back and wish I had done this sooner."

The little house servant that's grown with Hannibal since he was first brought to them as a weak and frail young boy, accepts his promise and merely steps away from the car as the window rolls back up and the car steers away from the driveway curb, and out onto the long gravel path to the dirt main road. Hannibal doesn't look back at the house nor does he bother to look out the window. He closes his eyes and looks at how he remembers his home to be, imaging Chiyoh and his Aunt holding onto Mischa's hand, standing at the gates, staring at the back of his head as he goes. As he drives farther and farther away in his mind, they begin to look like ghostly specks, haunting his memory and awaiting his return.

The same couple months later....

Will gets home from school late today. Dr. Bloom wanted to have a small session with him before he went home since he skipped out on their session at lunch time to go to the mini mart with a new kid he made friends with named Jack. Will didn't have any friends, he keeps to himself and he sees no point in making real friends since he moves so often. But, Jack and him live down the block from each other on the poorer side of Manassas, Virginia. Their friendship bloomed for convenience sake more than anything else. Some of the more passive bullies have stopped harassing him as often with Jack around and in return, Will helps Jack with English or Psychology homework. They'll hang out together mainly after school because Jack is significantly more likable and sociable than Will, and has countless friends to occupy him at lunch or in class. Will thinks Jack hangs out with him, mainly for the PR, since Jack is running for class president this year but if he's honest, he doesn't mind.

The reason they became friends in the first place was because Jack and himself were at the same criminal minds museum three weeks ago. Jack was there with a couple friends when he noticed Will, by himself, staring intently at one of the exhibits of a murderer who hung his victims up by fishing wire displaying domestic scenes in living rooms or kitchens and was never caught. Using that signature heap of confidence with a little rough charisma that Jack is known for and a side love for baseball, Will couldn't say no to Jack's friendly encounter and offer of friendship when he approached the curly haired boy.

Most people came to the museum for the creep factor, but not Will. He cataloged every exhibit in his mind and sorted memories of newspaper clippings he collected for many, if not all of the murders show cased in the museums. Will would skip going home on the 3 o' clock bus on the days he knew his dad was working late so he could go out to the museum. He doesn't know why he does it, but he knows it must be important to do it.

Will sighs and sits at the kitchen table now, backpack dropped at his ankles, remembering today. Dr. Bloom, although a little perturbed by Will ditching lunch with this newer friend, was over all joyous that Will had made a friend in the first place.

"I'm delighted your getting on better in these past couple months! A new friend is an improvement." (Italics)

Will would like to agree but there's been no decrease in nightmares. He still has sleepless nights he refuses to confide in Dr.Bloom about and tells her just enough to give some relief to the surface tension of the near overflowing glass of water that is his anxiety. He swallows back an impending shudder thinking about black abysses and bloody hands clawing their way through the dark trying to grab at him.

"Yeah right..." he scoffs, trying to brush the fear from his shoulders as he gets up to make a peanut butter and banana sandwich with the ends of a loaf of bread and a half eaten banana sitting in the fridge about to go bad.

His dad won't be home till after dark which means he can go out on the roof to do homework. It is his favorite thing to do at night when his dad isn't looking. They live just far enough from the main city to have the light pollution be obsolete. From the roof at just after sundown, the field and sky meld together into what Will imagines is an endless, swirling sea of ocean and stars. His house, a boat under him, floating away in endless ocean with no destination— solitary and quiet. When he lays his head against the shingles of the roof after sundown, he can almost hear the sway of the boat against the waves, and the creak of the cabin under him. His homework fluttering at the corners along the soft wind, emulating the thin sail or flag of his humble vessel. His mistake is being lulled to sleep by such notions. His eyes close on a blanket of stars and cool winds, calming his thoughts into a painless slumber.

Will dreams of something he sees in a paper, folded and faded, resting on the porch of his mind cabin. Big block letters yelling, "GIRL MISSING: LAST SEEN AT BUS STOP. THIRD IN PAST 5 MONTHS. WHAT ACTION MUST MANASSAS SCHOOL TAKE?". There hasn't been any sign of the girls since their abduction until the day before yesterday. A group of hikers found a box of body parts rotting on an abandoned trail near the end of the wood. Holes bore into the sockets of each appendage, and they were all sprayed with a crystallizing sealant to make them firm, like plastic. Will feels a strong tugging sensation in his gut when he knows something to be true. He wouldn't want his master piece to be found, but the game is getting boring with the police running around with their heads cut off. He likes collections and his isn't complete quite yet. He doesn't have all his pieces and his design lacks diversity. The pictures of the three girls slip through the pages and wriggle under the front door. The garden is the dark place, the front door is his safe space, Will says almost like a mantra. He begins to tremble thinking where the pictures are going. He opens the door slowly and sees the pictures come off their wet inked backings. The girls stand before him in a line, still and dead eyed, like dolls, hung by fishing wire.

"Something about all of you, something about none of you," Will whispers suddenly.

His body moves for him, and his voice speaks without his say so. He walks past the figures, to and fro and clicks his tongue in slight disapproval, "You have wonderful arms, but those legs, no no, they won't do. And you, your hair is perfect, but I can't stand your eyes. Might she have yours instead? Yours remind me of skies."

Will can only control where his eyes look as his body moves and walks, and breathes without him. He's beginning to panic—there's no where to run. He can smell and sense the predator around him, and in him, he wants to vomit. The three girls seem to shift and snap unnaturally. Their limbs and features tumble away like toy pieces and roll across the floor. They rearrange

a million times before him and the after images of all the variations stare at him in the body that isn't his. They all begin to chatter and make indiscernible noises at him to make a decision on what pieces to take. He doesn't know. He doesn't know. His eyes hop too and fro, too and fro trying to find his pieces and doesn't see himself sinking into the floor boards before it's too late.

He jumps awake, soaking in sweat and panting. The shake of his consciousness shreds at his memory and he doesn't remember what his dream is about. It swims away from him in his mind and he doesn't see any after images dancing in the sky around him. He is almost thankful for that, but remembers that it is the tiniest relief in a sea of questions. He's tried a number of times to capture and express these horrors his mind conjure up and falls short because he can't keep them or when he does, he can't admit they aren't nightmares. In some twisted and bitter way, they feel like fantasies, and that thought alone frightens him uncontrollably.

He's yet to disclose his hobby of clipping murder cases across Virginia and Maryland to anyone. Will lies on the roof and thinks about his hobby, unsure if there's a connection to his most recent dream. He does it to see if he can solve them from the little detail and scrubby photos the police disclose. Will can't help himself—even from very vague or dramatized stories, Will Graham sees so much, and wants to catch them, just so he can be assured none of the atrocities are his doing. He can feel his own gears clicking and turning at the heels of these faceless murderers and villains. Submitting himself to such graphic media worsens his nightmares but if he ignores any of it, it feels like he's wronging the victim somehow.

Will is unsure of the time, but knows it's late. He should clamber down and get in the house before his dad notices, if he's not at the bar making an ass of himself. He collects his homework and supplies, shaking off the sweat from his forehead, and climbs off the roof, using his window frame and water spout as leverage down. It's easy to climb into his open window after that. Setting his stuff on the floor, he grabs at a wrinkled shirt in the same motion and throws his wet one into the small bathroom connected to his room. He wraps a towel around his shoulders and wipes his face and curls of any lingering fear. The house is quiet, but he can hear a low mumble of voices out in the hall. Peaking from his bedroom door, blue and white light illuminates part of the hall from the living room.

Quietly, he creeps out. In his socks, he makes no noise that disturbs his father and when he gets to standing in the full living room made of sparse furniture, he sees what has happened while he was asleep on the roof. His father came home drunk, having grown tired of ranting to the boys at the bar, drank some more and promptly fell asleep to Singin' in the Rain on midnight replay. Didn't bother looking for his son to rant some more to. Probably didn't even notice Will wasn't in the house all evening. What's the point? His son wouldn't understand. He's a yellow-bellied, air headed dreamer like his mother, Will impersonates, staring at his father in the dim light of the tv. Will frowns, gently taking the near empty whiskey bottle from his father's hand as he snores on the reclining chair.

"...a motto I always lived by. Dignity, always dignity. This was instilled in me, well, by mom and dad. From the very beginning, they sent me to the finest schools, and dancing school..." Don says proudly from the television. Laughter and applause echo.

Will holds the bottle by its neck, rooted to the spot. In the blink of an eye sees himself bring it over his head and slam it over his father's in one swift motion. Will's breath quicken as he shakes his head free of the image. He still has the bottle by the neck, and his dad still snores soundly. Will can only grip the bottle tighter afraid it might slip from him and smash into a million pieces over his father all on its own. Wide eyed, he forces his feet to walk past the reclining chair back into the hallway to throw away the whiskey and lay awake until the sun comes up.

Chapter End Notes

I promise they meet in the next chapter. I'm such a long winded person haha. Honestly, I write these very late at night when I'm the least lucid and I've always been obsessed with Will and Hannibal's abilities to see things that convey such beautiful metaphor and analogy within the show. This chapter is pretty long I think, but I think it better stabilizes what mind sets both boys have at this point in their lives.

The details from the same murders will be a reoccurring point that hopefully develops into a nice chunk of plot that makes things interesting.

Collision

There's a sigh of relief that emanates from Hannibal as his first foot steps into Baltimore. He smiles politely to himself, holding onto the one bag that has been at his heel the entire journey. The air is bitter and smoggy from the factories and cars. Even on clear days like today, in the heart of Baltimore everything seems slightly dark and Hannibal thinks it's perfect. His condominium was bought in the arts district of Baltimore. It's not really a condominium per say, but more of a house, stretched upward rather than out. Gentrified and upscale compared to the rest of city, his developing tastes for the overt and eccentric blend in too well. Hannibal can only think everything is too easy and he has his own brilliance to thank for that.

Setting down his bag at the small porch to his condominium, he pulls out an array of keys and selects one only at a glance and puts it into the key hole, unlocking the door as if he's been living there for years. When he enters, he expects an empty house, but as he crosses the landing and peeks into the parlor and the drawing room, there's furniture. He scrunches his nose. The decor is all wrong and the color palette is atrociously mall of America. He walks into the parlor first and examines the cheap, family-oriented couches and lounge chairs. He almost thinks they'd look better with child-finger prints and juice stains on them just to relieve the eyes of having to look at the whole atrocity. Back in Lithuania, he picked all his own decor and Murasaki helped to at least start refining his tastes with her own eccentric ones clearly demonstrated within their estate living spaces.

He'd wait till he's settled to call the decorator his Aunt hired, but he can't. Immediately pulling out a small leather bound book from his coat pocket, he flips through it and pulls a business card out. Reaching over to the ghastly beige plastic house phone, he dials for the decorator.

"This is Ms. Guilleres' office, how may I direct your call?" The assistant answers cheerfully.

"Good afternoon, this is Mr. Lecter, the current resident at 925 St Paul Street. I believe my aunt hired Ms. Guilleres to decorate our property and I believe there might have been a miscommunication with our order," Hannibal addresses politely to the man on the phone.

"Oh! Of course! What seems to be the issue?" He responds instantly with a gasp intermingled in his voice.

"I'd much rather talk to Ms. Guilleres. The issue of the palette and the-" Hannibal is cut off just as he is about to divulge his concerns to the assistant.

"Oh the palette? You know what, I'll patch you right through," He says rushed and forwards his call to Ms.Guilleres' office before Hannibal could have another word.

Hannibal crinkles the business card in his hand ever so slightly and grips the phone that much harder trying to contain his need to tap his foot in annoyance. The hold music he can barely stand, and by the time the phone picks up, Ms. Guilleres doesn't bother with formalities and gets straight to the point.

“Mr. Lecter! I was told you had a problem with the palette in your home?” She says, completely oblivious to any mistake being made.

“Well, a problem would insinuate there’s only one. I have quite a few issues with what I walked into when I arrived into my home nigh 15 minutes ago and the palette is the least of them. I believe in my receipt I stated that-,” He’s interrupted again.

“Hold on for one second. Are you Robert Lecter?”

Hannibal has to pause just as Ms. Guilleres has. Ms. Guilleres will be sealing her fate if she makes the comment Hannibal thinks she is about to make, “No, I am Hannibal Lecter. Robertus Lecter is my uncle.”

“I thought so! You sound so young! Sweetie, please put your uncle on the phone. It’s cute to be trying to take care of business for him but I’d appreciate it, if there is a concern, for the adult to take care of it. That way there is no miscommunication.” Her laugh over the phone rings in his ears like nails on chalk board but Hannibal remains very calm.

“You know, Ms. Guilleres, you are absolutely right. I don’t know what I was thinking trying to do this for my Uncle. Unfortunately, my uncle is unavailable. May I at least take care of an appointment time for my Uncle? He doesn’t like talking business over the phone anyway.” Hannibal states, using undertones of fake apprehensiveness.

“Absolutely! I’m glad we could compromise on the issue. My assistant will pencil you in. Continue being a good boy. Ta ta now!”

The phone goes quiet for a moment before the assistant picks up again and lists a million appointment times, never even bothering to ask if Hannibal had an appointment preference. Hannibal rolls his eyes and pretends to deliberate on a time before picking a completely random schedule. With a small smile on his face, he verifies that Ms. Guilleres’ last appointment is at 5–just in case his “uncle” needs to rearrange his appointment. After hanging up the phone, Hannibal files the business card away in his breast pocket, not thinking about the rude encounter again. Exhaling his sour mood away, he ignores the furnishings of both entry rooms and makes his way to the kitchen to sort out the errands for the day.

Aside from his carry on suitcase, the other bags will follow suit with in a short week but until that time, he must go shopping for essentials. A house maid will stay with him whilst in Baltimore along with an in house chef four days of the week. The chef sent him a grocery list via mail while on his Journey through Europe, and a recommendation for a refined, boutique butcher and grocer. He paces the new wooden floors within his kitchen, and quietly cursing his inability to legally drive. America is a vast place with too many irresponsible youths to spare, he reminds himself. The law prevents him from taking many liberties that he’s use to in Lithuania and it leaves him slightly perturbed, but Hannibal is the embodiment of patience. He can wait for his opportune moment to be independent and free to play in the sand box at his leisure when the time is right. For now, he will have Manny drive him to the grocer and butcher shop near the border of Baltimore.

“Oh come on, Will. We won’t get in trouble. My uncle’s best friend runs the pool hall on Rice St. It’s not dark yet, it’s cool to go shoot a game or two,” Jack says carelessly, throwing his arms behind his head, strolling towards the bus stop.

“I don’t really care for pool, Jack, and besides....” Will’s words fall away from him as he hugs a textbook not in their school curriculum.

“Besides what? I can’t hear you over the buzz of your own kill joy attitude,” His friend shoots back, leaning on the bus stop pole and looking back at him.

Will huffs, and pushes some of the curls from his face. He refrains from finishing his sentence, not wanting to tell Jack he was slightly paranoid that he might bump into his father there. It would never happen—his dad works far from that particular pool hall, and is a cards man anyway, but the concern was still there.
“Never mind...let’s just go so you can never say I didn’t do something your way,” Will grumbles.

“That’s the spirit! Now there’s the Will I wanna hang out with!” The future class president exclaims with excitement chasing after his words.

Will can only roll his eyes. He watches the sky, and waits for Jack to flag down the bus that comes precisely at 3:05 everyday for outskirt Baltimore. Once on the bus, Will settles to look out the window at passing people while Jack listens to his walkman and plays finger drums on his thighs. Will’s mind wanders away from him, and he wishes he was fishing. He’s found it helps when he’s agitated or bored. It keeps him from thinking or seeing other things.

On a deep inhale, he can almost feel the cool breeze and hear the sway of low trees over the stream as he casts another line. The whirr of his fishing spool is gentle and hypnotizing. It’s like this for a long time up until their bus stop is a block away. Will hears the stirring of brush, and turns every which way calmly. Fishing rod still in hand, unsure where the noise came from but it’s obvious it’s intentional. Just as he’s about to turn back to the trout, the noise dissipates back behind the running of the stream. From the corner of his eye, he sees the stag. It feeds on the banks of the river and stamps a hoof gently almost asking him to wake. Will’s eyes narrow and with the final stamp of its hoof, he jolts awake and looks around him. Jack hasn’t noticed anything and neither has anyone else on the bus. He sighs and looks out the window at people again hoping for relief, and immediately freezes. Outside he sees it for the first time.

Tall, black and antlers sprouting for its head. It wears a nice suit and coat, but it’s eyes are white and dead. Will wants to scream but he doesn’t. His body jumps up as the figure passes his window and out of his line of sight. He finds himself running down the bus way trying to get a better look through all the windows as the bus passes the figure. He needs to know what it is and why it is. Who is that? Jack is shoved somewhere in the process of Will’s outburst of movement and pulls a headphone off.

“Will? Will?? Where are you going?” Jack yells back at his friend.

The bus stops at their designated stop, and Will jumps off the moment the exit doors open not waiting for Jack to catch up. Sprinting back down the street, his eyes are searching and searching for the figure in the small crowds of families and tourists coming in and out of shops. He passes a butcher without a second glance, and slows to a walk near a fancy grocer and wine shop. Somewhere along the way, he dropped his book and his hands were free but he can't bother with it right now. Will runs shaky, free hands through his hair, sweating and afraid he'll fall over from shock but never stops in his search. From the corner of his eye he thinks he sees the figure but when he fully sets his gaze in that direction he sees only an older boy looking back at him with a gaze so intense, he can feel the heat from it choking him.

Will blinks and tries to act normal, as if he didn't make eye contact and draw attention to himself, but the boy across the way has already seen him and is still staring. The boy is older than he is by at least a couple years and beautiful from what Will can tell. Will sees him continue to talk to a taller and older man who is holding grocery bags. The man only nods and disappears into a fancy, blackish-blue Royce while the boy doesn't. Will continuously peeks from behind his eyelashes in his direction and notices the boy come his way. Will, in a fight or flight response, dives into the fancy grocery store and weaves within the small, and packed aisles, hiding. He presses up against one of the aisles filled with french and Belgian imported cookies with names so long and unpronounceable, he doesn't even bother looking at them to drive his mind away from everything else. He stares at the nicely tiled floor, focusing on nothing but his breathing. He hates himself in this very moment.

Will counts to ten, and remembers his mantra from therapy, "You are on steady ground. You are in control. You are on steady ground and in control."

"Excuse me?" A smooth and accented voice interjects from behind Will. Will's shoulders hike up and he immediately turns. It's the same boy from earlier holding something Will recognizes. This boy was fast and absolutely silent—he could have sworn he had only been in the aisle for a minute or so and never heard him coming.

"I noticed you in a hurry and saw you drop your text book." The boy states, holding out the textbook for Will.

He can't respond. He's awe struck. He's in such close proximity, he feels he can't even sneak a breath without the other noticing how shaky it is.

"You best be careful. Textbooks are quite precious and the binding already seems rather worn," the boy continues.

"I...." Will was going to say that he's usually very careful with his books, especially because they're all 2nd hand from a discount book shop in his neighborhood, but he can't say a word. There is an indescribable feeling worming it's way through his gut that is short circuiting his ability to speak. He doesn't make eye contact for more than a second at a time, but when he does, he feels the burn of the others eyes on him. A strong and fierce well of emotions hiding behind hazel-ruby eyes. The boy himself is eccentric to look at with high cheek bones and fair skin, topped with this rare shade of blonde and brown hair mix. All his features pop behind this charcoal black coat and burgundy argyle accents. Will suddenly feels like he shouldn't be allowed to even look at him.

This boy, gentle in his delivery, places the book in Will's hands and smiles at him, "Please, you must need your book back. Take it, I promise I won't bite."

Will swallows and nods his head, taking the book and pressing it to his own chest, "Thank...thank you. Uh....i...."

"I'm Hannibal Lecter by the way," Hannibal chimes in, seeing this new acquaintance is having difficulty conversing with him.

"I'm Will Graham," He mimics, finally making an effort by extending out his hand to shake Hannibal's.

Hannibal has a strong grip to match his sharp features and he's reached an age where he's begun to broaden at the shoulders. He has a couple inches on Will's height already and it makes him all the more intimidating....like a predator, Will thinks, and immediately bites his own tongue at the thought.

"Pleasure is all mine, Will Graham. Are you a resident of Baltimore? I only just moved here," Hannibal inquires.

Hannibal, himself usually won't go out of his way to converse with a local unless necessary but Hannibal couldn't help himself. This boy caught his eye from across the way with those gorgeous Atlantic sea eyes, and a porcelain face, rosy from running a block and a half. He would have noticed those dark brown curls anywhere and when he steps into the proximity of Mr. Graham, he can smell tinges of sea salt and peanut butter with over-ripe bananas.

"I....move a lot, but I live about 20 minutes from here. Where-where are you from? I can't...place your accent...." He mumbles, pressing himself further away from Hannibal.

Hannibal enjoys watching the boy in front of him try to disappear amongst the array of cookies and tea cakes. He doesn't know what makes Will so interesting at first, but when he pushes a step closer and peers into Will's face and catches a glimpse into the two pools of his eyes, he has to refrain from showing any sign of surprise. Will sees through him and bites back any words for fear he might sound crazy. Hannibal watches from outside himself how Will peaks under the stitching and sees a glimpse of what lurks and shuffles behind his person suit. There's no scream of horror and no shudder in discovery, but instead, just a shocking amount of understanding and a sigh of relief from new companionship after a lifetime of loneliness.

"Lithuania. I'm going to be attending John Hopkins University in a few years and I'm simply surveying the school and taking a program there before heading off to boarding school in Europe," Hannibal says simply, as if it was a normal course of action for boys his age.

Will, between the constant feelings of embarrassment, shock and confusion, almost wants to roll his eyes. He lives in a completely different world than the person standing too near to him. He's envious in that moment, of Hannibal, telling him his plans for the future and his reasoning for being in this specific city. His dad must make a lot of money and love Hannibal a great deal to give him so much that it lets him dress the way he does and speak the way he does. For all he knows, he himself would be lucky if he wriggles out of his dad's grasp long

enough to escape a life of being a boat yard hand. He wonders if he grew up in a household like he assumes Hannibal has, if they'd be the same. Will wants to crawl into a hole and never be seen again....Regretting being born to a boat hand and a run-away girl.

"What are you thinking, Will? About the boat yard or about the dreams you see walking amongst the living? Are you apalled by them and relishing in the freedoms they take that you can't bare to?" Hannibal asks, quiet and intimate between them in the aisle. He absolutely can't help being a little analytical and dark in his approach for what he really wants to know.

"H-how....do you—" Will's breath is non existent and he feels he's turning blue and might faint.

"You smell of fear and sea salt. The bags under your eyes indicate you haven't had a good nights sleep in quite some time. Your hands," He takes Will's hands into his own, clean and smooth in comparison, "are quite calloused for a boy your age and your shirt has an oil stain at the hem."

Will immediately pulls his hands free of Hannibal's, "Oh....it-I.... Y-you...you are very forward. I-I should go. I was...with-with a frien-"

Hannibal won't let him slip away, "I can control my insight into others just about as much as you can, which is probably, not at all. I would much like for us to be friends. I don't mean to frighten you."

Will begins to not like the conversation. From the tone to the assumptions, despite whether they're true or not, rubs Will the wrong way and he has to squeeze his book to prevent himself from making a scene. The offer of friendship feels like a joke and a bad jab at his social status. He can handle being bullied and teased by kids in his own ring of society, but the upper class stooping below to laugh at him is too cruel to ignore. In a voice of warning he looks up at this elegant stranger and spits his words, "I'm not FRIGHTENED. You don't know me. You don't know the first thing about me. Go buy some friends if your lonely, you seem like you can afford it. I'm not for sale nor am I up for jokes."

He begins to speed walk away like a wounded animal, but turns back to get one last look, "You probably think your interesting, but you aren't. I don't find you interesting or different from any other socialite that thinks a couple of pony tricks can fool boat yard and mechanic kids like me."

Will rushes out of the grocery store, and his confronted by his friend Jack in the same action. Jack gasps and waves his arms as he comes to greet his friend with a scowl on his face.

"Dude!! Where on earth did you go? You took off like a racing dog! Are you kidding? What happened?" He questions loudly.

Will shakes his head, the sweat and anger spilling from him like a hot kettle. He grabs the back of Jacks neck for support and exhales so deeply, his lungs burn, "I'll explain later. Let's just get out of here. Are you still down for pool?"

“That’s where I’ve been trying to get to, you goon! Let’s goooo! Sun down is in like an hour!” Jack urges, pulling his friend along down the sidewalk.

Back in the grocery store, Hannibal stands at the store front window, watching from behind a shelf of dried garlic wreathes as the two boys pass. One smiling like life has been nothing but good to him, and the other, weak in his retreat but trying to pretend the world still spins to keep him grounded. Hannibal clicks his tongue. That was rather rude of Will, but it doesn’t negate the potential Will has within him for so much more than the writhing, shaky and starving mess that he is. He hums approval at this new game of his and files a torn piece of paper into his coat pocket for later that he picked off of Will. It’s getting rather late, and he simply must go collect the meat for his meal tonight.

The Death Hawk Moth Who Lived

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's tasteless," Will says bitterly, upon showing Dr. Bloom the paper that's just been printed and put out for sale at the student store.

"What about it is tasteless?"

Will has gotten a bit more comfortable talking to Dr. Bloom and sometimes walks around the office or paces trying to get his words to click together correctly. He currently is pacing and interlacing his fingers over pursed lips.

"Freddy Lounds is using these victims to get herself a leg up in her supposed career of the future. I can't stand it. It makes me angry that they deem that journalism. Leave this sort of stuff to the real writers and journalists who are actually trying to write real news. These jokers just feed off of the dead body's mystery like maggots."

Dr. Bloom has a certain face she makes when she's slightly surprised and slightly impressed with something Will says. He sees it frequently and he notes that she's even wearing it now . He's said something that's probably given himself away just a tad more than before and Dr. Bloom absorbs every ounce of it. Will is emotional, it comes with his weird ability to know what others are feeling or possibly thinking, and it makes it hard to contain the worms once the can is opened.

"But maybe I've expressed myself...too much...It's just a stupid school paper—it's probably worth even less than the worst tabloid paper in Manassas..." Will retreats, as he goes to sit in his usual place.

"Obviously, it means more than that to you. Don't down play your feelings for the sake of trying to appear, what you deem is normal. Remember that your goal is achievable, but only by expressing yourself and discovering why you do and say the things you do. I want you to confide in me as your mentor and as your friend. Now, if I may suggest, that perhaps your passion for justice fuels your irritation of the pace the police force is taking to catch this particular criminal. To have someone add commentary to the equation, equivalent to them stating that there is an equation at all and getting rewarded for such meager observations can be quite off putting to those who have been drawing up real results yet receiving nothing. It's understandable. Do you feel like you've received nothing? How do you feel that you are tied to any of this? Why bother?" Dr. Bloom questions, trying to draw clearer conclusions.

Will looks at Dr. Alana Bloom, full faced for the first time since he started taking her therapy. He wonders how much she knows or at least guesses to know. He contemplates telling her all he knows, and thinks back to Hannibal. He to wanted to know what Will sees to. He was so interested and just like now, Will was so tempted to tell him despite his anger. Will wonders who would have understood him better, if at all....

“I feel like I’m watching a play...and I’m the only one that can guess what happens next. Like, I saw the script in a dream...and it came true.” Will explains.

“And what have you concluded will happen next?” She asks carefully, her eyes narrowing a hair.

“Death, Dr. Bloom.” He answers, a sensation blooming in his gut akin to butterflies or skittering moths. The feeling is severe and Will has to put his hands discreetly over his belly to try and smooth away the crawling sensation under his skin that seems to wriggle up his belly and throat to tickle the back of his tongue.

Dr. Bloom puts down her pen just then and can’t form a response to fit all the things she wants to say or more importantly, ask, of Will. Will doesn’t look directly at her again, and she knows it’s because of his lack of control over his extreme empathy. She knows Will has already seen too many things for a boy his age, and she has to wonder what it’s like for him to go home to himself everyday. Will has never discussed the nightmares he has but in passing, and she knows they’re more serious than a casual foot note. She never pushes for him to recount any of it for fear it might scare him away entirely. The dark bags under his eyes, the disheveled shirts and the overall daze he always seems to be in by merely being awake despite the time of day tells Alana he’s suffering under his own train of thought. She needs time to think things over and create a plan for her patient. Clearing her throat and looking at her Rolex, she stands.

“It’s just about time for us to wrap things up before your next class. We’ll pick up from here next week, shall we? And hopefully, we can find an outlet for you. Perhaps I’ll have a talk with the administration on the censorship of their newspaper if it’ll make you feel any better?” Dr. Bloom suggests as she leads Will to her office door.

Will simply nods and walks out ahead of her, tipping his chin to the assistant at her desk, before heading out to Chemistry class. Alana watches him go from her door, and can’t help but wonder if there is anything she could do for him, as a guardian and as a friend. She’s never met someone quite like Will Graham and she almost feels helpless for him.

Everyone has been talking about it. Monday mornings are usually quiet as the whole of society tries to shake itself of the sleepy or energy draining weekend its had. But today’s Monday is very different to say the least. So far, it’s been nothing but gossip and gab as the student paper prints and posts the disappearance and murder of another person. This time, an older woman, popular with the PTA and with daughters currently attending Manassas High. They found her body over the weekend posed like a chair, screws and pvc pipes twisted into her skin to help keep her position still. Her face turned up to the sky as if looking for someone. Kidneys and liver were missing, (which is a first) and her left arm is missing to, having been replaced with someone else’s arm. To say the news sent the student body into a frenzy would be an understatement.

No one has seen any real evidence since the discarded remains on the hiking trail that popped up a couple months ago, and now all of sudden, they have almost a whole victim to go off of.

The school paper conspiracy goons are already saying it's another homicide related to what they're calling the 'Gepetto Projects'. Someone in the newspaper club thinks they're so witty, but it's tacky and disgusting and Will knows they're wrong. Nothing about this woman fits the criteria this doll maker seems to have in mind for his victims, pre or postmortem.

Will saw Ms. Guilleres on the front page of the paper this morning on his way to see Dr. Bloom and scrunched his nose at the photo. He was sorry for her death, and sorry that the Guilleres twins will grow up without a mother, but he wasn't sorry he never had the experience of meeting her. From the gaudy makeup and the flashy, nosey smile she had, Will could tell she's perhaps ticked off one too many people in her rush and go line of work before finally meeting the person that would do something to change that.

In his dissection of the evidence, clippings all over his desk, he imagines things. He swallows back bile that rises past his uvula at the thought of an impure body coming anywhere near his work. The taste of bile rises in him again and wants to wretch himself free of any of those thoughts. A flash of that stupid and weird kid from the boutique square crosses his mind and his face reddens. Discreetly knocking his palm against his temple, he tries to loosen the image from his mind. He isn't sure if it's from embarrassment or anger or both but he doesn't care. It reminds him that he can't let his thoughts and dreams effect him so heavily. He has to prove it to himself and the kid from the grocery store, even if he'll never see that dumb, perfect face again. His own thoughts simmer down as the image of proving Hannibal wrong about controlling his ability to see, massages away his boiling mood like putting a top on a pot. He breathes and wipes the sweat away from his top lip. Will can't let himself get carried away.

No one cared for the school newspaper before these kidnappings started happening, but now, they're deeming the weasel Freddie Lounds, a big future in journalism with a nice scholarship to follow her after high school for her abilities to raise the newspaper buy in by 106%. They even put her kidnappers article on the front page of the Manassas City paper. It has nothing to do with abilities, it's just happenstance, Will thinks sourly as he twiddles his pencil in Chemistry. He can't stand the comments and the jokes that buzz about him like flies, but he knows they can't help it. It's a way for the whole of his school to try and shake the fear that danger might be closer than anyone can really predict. The police are nowhere nearer to catching this child predator than trying to catch big foot. Will can see it in the police's desperation to remind parents to keep close tabs on their kids and for kids not to go near white vans. With a grown woman disappearing now, even the school staff are scared. Now no one is truly safe, but Will thinks there's something off about this last missing person. He just can't quite put his finger on what it is yet.

The bell rings and all the kids perusing around the class or talking in groups begin to file into their seats desperately before the teacher walks in from the restroom. Will hurriedly shoves all his newspaper scraps into his backpack before anyone comes within clear eyeshot of his workspace. He looks around anxious but nobody pays him any mind and class continues normally until sometime later when—

"Hey Graham, you should tell us right now if your the murderer. This story is getting boring and it'll ruin the popularity of our football season," A thick and blocky boy snorts as he

crumples the newspaper him and his friends were reading and throws it at the back of Will's head.

His friends giggle around him like a laugh track, slapping knees and patting shoulders. Will almost growls in response. The three stooges, Harry, Bernie and Sam have been harassing him since the beginning of freshman year. The only comfort he has is that he knows in about a year none of them will be friends because they all carry the characteristics of people that'd stab one another in the back just because they can. They'll be lonely and on the brink of a mental break down, wondering where they went wrong and why they truly have no close friends. Will feeds his anger with these notions and simply breathes out. He won't play into any games, it only fuels their joy and hunger for cruel entertainment.

"Why ain't he looking at us?" One says disappointed at Will's inaction.

"Because he knows it's true and he don't have the balls to say nothin'," Another one comments matter of factly.

The leader of the three stooges reaches over and shoves Will's back pack over so everything spills out, including newspaper clippings and a bunch of school supplies. The three boys see the clippings and zero in on it like hawks. They choke with disbelief and utter joy as they see big blocky words reading WHEN WILL THE HORROR END? IS MANASSAS SCHOOL DISTRICT SAFE FROM UNCATCHABLE KIDNAPPER? Will grabs for all his things hurriedly, trying to avoid making as much noise as possible. His favorite textbook had fallen open on the floor in the tumble and as he reaches for it, he notices something strange. The first page with his return-to-owner information on it had been torn clean away. When did that happen?

"What I tell you?! He's keeping track of the paper to! He's a narci killer after all!" The main stooge harps at his friends, cutting into Will's thoughts. Both minions loosing their minds with laughter and drawing the attention of the teacher to all the commotion.

"Will you gentlemen please settle down? You four are disrupting the class. There is plenty of time to fool around after class. Thank you." The teacher says firmly, upset at having to have his attention pulled away from the chalk board mid-theory.

Will doesn't say anything nor does he bother humoring them with a look, but the boys continue to snicker behind the books they pretend to use. He shrinks in on himself as eyes catch and snag on his person, some scowling, and some indifferent to the interruption. He wonders when the day will end. As he watches the clock's arm go round, he deliberates skipping the rest of school. Will is extremely put off and can't handle another confrontation by anyone. The mere thought of speaking to another person in his current state has him feeling like he should run for the hills hoping that he runs so hard that his lungs explode and kill him on the spot.

Everyone speeds out when the bell rings at last, picking up books and worksheets before glueing together in groups of friends and making their ways out. Except Graham, whose one of the last and he's, of course, alone.

“Graham, don’t forget your newspaper!” One of the same boys calls out as Will exits the class, a big, and soppy wad of paper hitting his neck as he tries to escape. The water dribbles down his spine and wets his shirt and the back of his backpack. He peels the wad from his neck in pieces, shaking it from his hands in the hallway.

Will scrunches his shoulders and shakes his head angrily. He stalks towards an emergency exit door in the farthest hallway, shoves the door open and sprints past the front of the auditoriums to the next block. The emergency siren doesn’t work on that particular door, but nobody really knows that nor do they bother to check. He overheard one of the janitors discuss the issue over the phone last semester, but it never was fixed, to Will’s delight. You just have to be fast enough to escape the possibility of being seen by the one or two campus assistants that hover around the main building entrance, but other than that, you’re home free. With a sigh that seems to follow him more often these days, Will takes off his backpack and carries it by the top handle to let the sun dry his back.

He would have taken the bus to somewhere, but he passes the stop. Doesn’t know quite why, but something pulls him to the park. He’d perhaps do a bit of homework and take a nap under a tree until the 3 o’ clock bus rolled up, Will decides. The park was fairly empty at this time of day and the streets it borders are all residential with hardly any traffic from the main roads. Will picks a nice spot under a big birch tree neighboring a patch of wild daisies and a huddle of cotoneaster bushes. The winds brush through his messy array of curls, just as much as it ruffles the bushes and branches of the nature around him. It’s very peaceful and it helps Will forget about the day. Before he knows it, he drifts away from advanced calculus homework to his text book on ‘Criminal Minds, and the Psychology Behind Them’. He’s read the book a million times and the pages are dog eared and worn from constant flipping. Sometimes, Will likes to reread all of his own notes that fill the margins just to follow trails of thought from months before. It’s helped him understand why some criminals do what they do and why he makes certain leaps in thought on cases he’s studied. He gets lost in the pages often, and submerges his head under the waters of countless connections he makes as he reads the published case files.

Hannibal is looking at the torn, and tattered piece of paper that he took from Will’s book the Friday previous. His fingers rub over the edges, slightly frayed due to the age and make of the paper, while thinking. His driver, Manny, pulls up a block or so away from the bus station closest to the school that Will Graham goes to. Hannibal has never been to public school. He was use to private tutors, and detests any other way. A school, in its concept, is completely foreign to him, but it intrigues him all the same in the way it has had a hand in shaping his new interest. The scale of the government school system is too large to not have several students slip through the cracks of their fingers and drown in their own turmoils. He sees Will as one of these students. Someone who is quiet, and well adjusted to being ignored because he’s been trained to believe he’s part of the masses, a dime a dozen. Hannibal has to physically shake his head as he steps out of the car and begins to walk to and past the bus stop toward the park.

His plan is to sit at the park until Will gets out from his classes and makes his way to the bus stop to go home. Hannibal assumed that was Will's routine for most days and it's a perfectly plausible way to 'bump' into Will again without it seeming to conspicuous. He unfolds the newspaper he received late this morning to take a peak at it whilst walking to his destination. There is a giddy smile he has to hide as the disappearance of particularly unsavory woman makes front page news. The panic the paper seems to evoke makes Hannibal want to laugh and throw the paper up like confetti. He won't do it, of course, but he can picture himself doing it. He almost hums as he strides towards a park bench when he then stumbles on a familiar head of curls hiding in a shadier area of the park.

"Ah, it's you again." A voice chimes in, making itself known amongst his thoughts.

The voice is soft and almost nostalgic when it interrupts his reading. Will looks up and sees an unlikely face. He immediately ducks his head back farther into his book, suddenly feeling very exposed and vulnerable. He didn't even hear them coming—where did he come from??

"I don't know what you're talking about. We've never met before," Will responds tensely.

"Forgive me, I might not have as memorable a face as I deem yours to be. My name is Hannibal. I believe we met in front of Le Cerf the other day? I brought your book back to you," Hannibal recounts, stepping slightly closer with hands behind his back, holding the rolled up newspaper.

Will's face twists sourly amongst the pages. He could never forget a face like Hannibal's and he hated the fact. Recounting the story of their meeting and skipping over the last portion of their encounter made Will's guts curdle.

"Returned my book back to me without a page in it, you mean," He says bitterly, and is shocked by his own words but flips a page and has no outward reaction in hopes that it looks like he meant to say that aloud.

"I beg your pardon?" Hannibal asks, with an expression close to that of someone with their hand caught in the cookie jar.

He chuckles softly then, slightly off set at his own inability to be discreet. He took Will for someone who didn't quite notice things like that amidst the million other things that are on his mind. Despite how much his thoughts seem to swim around him, he is still rather perceptive and Hannibal takes mental note of that.

"I have been caught red handed by you, Graham. I have to admit I didn't mean any ill will by damaging your book. I simply acted on impulse," He admits to the curly haired look-alike of Saint Roch.

Will couldn't help but look up to the intruder with a frown, and a narrow to his icy blue eyes, "Thjs is probably the worst bullying attempt I've experienced all year. If your going to ruin

my book, at least do it right and tear it in half, or throw it in a fountain so I don't have to be constantly reminded by the fact that I'm being harassed."

"There is no attempt I am making to bully you. I believe we got off on the wrong foot the first meeting, and possibly, now the second, but you mistaken my want for friendliness as some sort of misconstrued joke. I knew from the moment I saw you that I wanted to see you again and needed to secure a way for my person to do that if our conversation went awry," The high cheek boned boy explains politely, "And obviously, it did."

Will is shocked to say the least. Nothing in this world could protect him from the emotions that dropped into his chest like lead bricks after hearing the words 'I wanted to see you again'. He's never been told that in his life and it unsettles him. He has to rub his face to make sure he isn't dreaming a sick dream about the stranger he was sure he would never see again. Even after all the terrible things he said to him, Hannibal still is polite and, gentle with his words. It leaves him feeling in the wrong somehow.

"Why-why me?" He stutters out, looking at everything about Hannibal and deflating at being reminded of how absolutely different they are.

"To be frank, I'm alone in a new country and I'm having difficulty adjusting. I saw you, and saw myself in you. Alone, lost and floating away from yourself into the unknowns of your brain. I had to reach out and tell you, you are not alone, we are the same."

Hannibal really wasn't having trouble adjusting. He was doing just fine, but in some sense of the words he spoke he misses his routines and his Aunt and Chiyoh. He needs company and he took one look at Will, and saw so much potential when he saw him that time across the street. Hannibal does not yet know Will Graham very well, but he already wants to give him the gift of knowing, of seeing.

Will swallows, but his throat is dry. He closes his book and interlaces his jittery fingers over loose, bent knees before muttering, "...Oh."

It was all he could muster. Hannibal took this as his cue to sit and accompany his new acquaintance. He sits very much like Will does, sets the newspaper down between them and with his back to a cotoneaster bush, begins to pick some of the berries.

"Those aren't edible, you know," Will comments, watching Hannibal's hands pick at the best looking ones.

"I am well aware. Cotoneaster berries are fascinating though, aren't they? They grow in absolute abundance, they're brilliant in color and they're toxic to humans," Hannibal says as he holds up a berry between his pointer and thumb.

To Will it almost looks like a bright red bead of blood from a pin pricked finger. He watches the berry squish under a firm hand and translucent juice spill down Hannibal's thumb. It trails along his thin wrist and what was visible of his forearm. He dared the bead of liquid to go any lower, and when gravity beckoned it so, Will gulps soundlessly.

“In other words, they’re essentially useless,” Will says with a huff to his tone, looking away immediately, and settling his sights on a dog with their owner in the distance.

“Useless, no, cotoneasters have many uses. They’re great for decor in my opinion... and they’re a great feeding source for larvae,” Hannibal counters.

“Larvae?”

“Indeed. Some death-hawk and short-cloaked moths lay eggs in Cotoneaster bushes in hopes their young will venture to feast on the fruit or plant at the ends of the bushes where the sun shines the most. Its rare that they do because It’s quite a dangerous task for both the layer and the larvae due to a Cotoneaster bushes ability to attract countless birds and predatory bugs,” He elaborates to his listener with a small smile and never wipes away the juice from his arm.

“I wonder why some do it if it’s so dangerous. They’ll be just the same if they eat in the shadows from berries that have already fallen on the ground,” Will wonders, starting to relate to the bugs that eat in the dirt or hide in the barks of trees away from all the commotion.

“Because in the end, it makes life that much sweeter...and makes them feel powerful, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you like to feel powerful, Will? To know that the life you enjoy costed you much more than the meager will of existence in it of itself?”

Will looks at the berries scattered around them, blown from the bushes by the wind and sees the small larvae and ants in the grass, picking through the left over or rotting berries. He frowns and doesn’t respond to Hannibal’s question. He’s scared that his answer would be something he himself doesn’t want to hear.

“I know I would fight,” Will’s companion says with utmost certainty, flicking away the berries, as if the intrigue for them had died away as soon as it birthed itself.

“Sure, you would fight, but at what cost would you pay for power?” Will asks with mild intrigue.

With a straight face, and an absolute expression, Hannibal stares in Will’s direction, “Any cost. My life...if that’s what it takes.”

There’s a silence between them. They listen to the sway of trees and grass together and it would have been peaceful if it didn’t feel like Will was going to choke on the anxious jittering that bounced around his insides. The silence squishing him like a cotoneaster berry, Will forced himself to asks Hannibal about the newspaper that sits between them like a third friend.

“A-Are you caught up with all the kidnappings happening in Manassas right now?”

“I was just reading about that on the front page. It’s hard not to be caught up. Everyone seems to gobble the victims’ misfortunes right up. Especially this last one...An older, adult woman? Nobody is safe anymore.” Hannibal breaches, a smug smile scratching at the surface of his skin, smothered by his self control.

Will has to rub at his face again, as if he was trying to rub away any sort of thought about the subject all together. He wants to chide himself on not being able to keep murderers out of any conversation he has with anyone, but then who would he be if not Will Graham? This new person seems to want to see him as he is....what's the point in pretending nothing is wrong with him? If he elaborates and exposes himself just a little, maybe it'll scare him off, and he can go back to drifting at sea alone.

"Does this last one seem different to you somehow? Like whoever did this is being a real try hard for the Gepett—for the other murderer?"

Hannibal's inside tingle, giddy at the new turn of conversation. He gestures for Will to continue his thought as if the question is rhetorical.

"All I'm saying is, most killers crave routine and pattern in some way, it's a given. They have at least one small trait to identify themselves or their purpose. I've read that they're all narcissists and egoists after all—they can't help themselves, but in this last murder, it just feels cookie cutter, doesn't it? Sure, the method is the same, the screws, the style and, no finger prints, no real evidence to go off of despite having the body but the love isn't the same."

Will pauses again, waiting for Hannibal to burst forth in shock at what Will is saying but he never does. He sits and patiently waits for him to finish and it makes him fidget with a certain kind of contentment.

"I think someone else is behind this. Whoever did this is putting a fish in a turkey skin and serving it at Thanksgiving. There is no love, and no want for Ms. Guilleres. The killer from before identifies with one thing within all of them—they're children. Children are malleable, innocent...and understanding. He wants someone who understands. He wants love and he'll take the pieces he needs to make someone who loves and understands him."

"Then, if what you say is true, what of this other killer? Can you see what kind person he is? What sorts of problems does he have?" Hannibal asks with much interest.

Will laughs uncomfortably, "Judging by just the way the police had found the body. It was slow, and agonizing for Ms.Guilleres to die. He wanted her to suffer in every conceivable way. The left arm is replaced with someone else's arm. Possibly, the connection that can be drawn is that the left has always been perceived as the hand of Satan, evil in a religious context, so this killer believed he was fixing her sin for eternity by taking her left arm and replacing it. Like how God punishes Eve for soiling the Garden of Eden, by damning them to the earth with mortality. People think the first guy is bad? The second killer is worse...so much worse. I've truly never read anything like the analyses I've written about this second psychopath—if he even really is one."

Will shutters in the imagery of Ms. Guilleres, sitting, arms outstretched, with eyes glazed over, awaiting permission to die. Her body set aflame before the both of them, coloring Will and Hannibal in orange warmths of light. Hannibal stares out and imagines the burning with Will. It's beautiful to him, and he's ecstatic at the thought that Will may have the ability to see it to.

“Pot cremar-se el maleït, i el sant prosperi.”

“What?”

“It’s a saying the conquistadores would chant as they flooded the streets, breaking down doors and dragging away heathens for the king of Spain. May the damned burn, and the holy thrive,”

“Ah, yes, killing people in the name of God. One of my favorite excuses. Load of crap is what it is.”

Hannibal muses over that, clicking his tongue once, “More of a statement than an excuse. The conquistadores apologized to no one for the deaths of their enemies. They killed in the name of God to show their love to him, to show appreciation for the power he gives. They believed they were not wrong. That God gave them the strength to smite the unworthy.”

“Like this copy cat killer....He’s showing God who he is, and we are just bystanders to his madness.”

“Perhaps?” He responds, his heart singing in his ears.

Hannibal stands after his finale. He looks at his watch and exhales before brushing off his pants. Will has to blink away his awe at being validated in his thoughts over there being potentially another killer. He watches Hannibal stand and then feels obligated to stand as well. He doesn’t really know what time it is. He doesn’t have a watch, but it seems Hannibal says the time allowed, as if he knew this to.

“It’s nearly 3:45. I should be getting home for my harpsichord lessons. Thank you for allowing me to spend this time with you, Graham. If you would like, I believe I can have someone drive you home.” Hannibal offers, bending to brush a couple stray leaves off of some of Will’s forgotten homework, and handing it to him.

“Ah, no...no thank you. I...I’ll just catch the bus. I was going to meet a friend anyway.” Will lies, shoving his homework into his backpack along with any other stray materials, and slinging the bag over his shoulder.

“Very well then. If you would like in the least...perhaps we can meet tomorrow. I have a book that I think you might enjoy. It’s about the household dynamics of criminals based on case studies from the early 1960s. If your interested? Might I also suggest we meet at my house? While I do enjoy the outdoors, I assure you my home is quite more comfortable and there are plenty of snacks.”

Helplessly, Will brims with excitement at the prospects of a new book and snacks, but is immediately put on edge at the prospects of meeting Hannibal’s family. He grips the strap to his bag and begins to fold in on himself. Meeting more people just like Hannibal would make him feel like a scared and surrounded animal.

And as if right on cue, like Hannibal was reading his mind as Will expels his thoughts to the wind, he interjects, “If it helps any, it will be just us tomorrow....my family....is predisposed

elsewhere.”

Will is still unstable about going to someone else’s home, but the book is very enticing and he won’t be meeting anymore people. It relieves his anxiety some. Only to see if it’s a good book or not, Will thinks to himself.

Hannibal brings a smile to his face that can only be described as a polite, and rehearsed sort of smile. It’s noticeable to Will, but he mimics the smile himself, and waves Hannibal away, before walking in the opposite direction. He’s missed the 3 o’ clock bus but, surprisingly, doesn’t really mind. He can walk home, and it’ll help mellow his mood out. He swears that with Hannibal his emotions rollercoaster till he can physically feel the strain of the rush.

There’s a kick in the others step as he goes. The conversation they had went really well the second time and he’s looking forward to there next encounter. It gives him a new game to play while not in lessons. He wonders then what Chiyoh or Auntie would say about Will Graham.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter was quite a doozy. I didn’t know exactly how to write what I wanted to write in a way that seemed interesting to more than just me. I know everyone has probably been waiting for more Hannibal and Will interactions and believe me, you’ll get them.

Childish

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Aunt Murasaki,

It's been almost two weeks since my last letter had been sent to you. I arrived safely in Boston, and while the scenery can not compare to the Venetian lagoons of Italy or the marbled beauty of Paris streets, it has a charm all its own. Ive come to find that I fit in quite nicely in the brooding and darkly persistent Fall that Boston always seems to be in. Who would have thought? It's too soon to tell if I'll come to enjoy everything Boston has to offer but at least it seems the people are promising.

I met a boy last week who reminds me of myself when I first came to live in your home. He's abrasive and extremely cautious to say the least, and yet, I find him entertaining. I invited him over to read books and enjoy one another's company. We will see how the endeavor goes. He brings stimulating conversation to the table. I think you would enjoy him.

I will say that Will is nothing short of a miracle—like discovering a rare champagne pearl in the most gnarled and disgruntling of clams. It makes the fisherman question how such a meager thing spawns such perfection. The fisherman wonders for a long time on this and what it means to him.

In other aspects of my new life, I've begun taking lessons with a harpsichord tutor, a culinary master, and a standard educations teacher to speed along my studies as per your recommendation. I have yet to visit John Hopkins but I imagine that I will receive a warm welcome when I decide to visit.

In the midst of my decisions, I feel it is also necessary that I should at least stay for a season in Baltimore. It unsettles me slightly to be away from you for so long, but I know you understand. How are you feeling? In your last letter you spoke of the horrid respiratory issues you were facing due to the cold mornings and infection in your sinuses. I enclose a recipe for tea that helps sooth the congested sinuses and clears the lungs. My culinary teacher gave me the recipe when I disclosed you had not been feeling well, hence your absence from the house in Baltimore. I tried out the herbal mix myself and was quite impressed with it. It's called A Mountain's Breath and thought it was quite fitting. It makes the teeth feel chilled and the chest warm—I hope you enjoy it. May you be in better health.

Your nephew,
Hannibal.

P.S I request the services of a new interior decorator. Tragically, it seems Ms. Guilleres passed away over the weekend due to a series of unfortunate events. I took the initiative to furniture shop for the home in Baltimore after the decorator never showed for our agreed appointment nor did she answer any of my calls. I enclose the newspaper clippings for your

read incase you'd care to read it. I admit I'm at a loss for words on the matter. She was a rather filling conversationalist.

A Mountain's Breath

1 teaspoon of eucalyptus
1/2 teaspoon of peppermint
2 teaspoons of lobelia
2 1/2 Osha Root

Bring water to boil before adding chopped, fine osha root with skin still attached. Let simmer for 2 minutes before adding eucalyptus, and lobelia. Stir water and lower heat to warming for 3 minutes. Add fresh peppermint and let stand on stove for 2 minute. Strain and serve before bed and/or first thing in the morning with slices of rye bread, tomatoes, spinach and butter.

____

Hannibal neatly licks the envelope closed and sets it aside at his desk. He looks at his watch and is expecting Will any minute now.

_____
_____

Will has been feeling a tingly dread from his toes to his throat all day since he woke up for school. He isn't entirely sure if the dreamless night he had the night before has anything to do with it but it makes him feel odd nonetheless. His skin was damp this morning and he had to shower before leaving for school, but there were no haunting figures or dark corners behind his eyes that made him tremble.

There's a buzzing hum in his brain that he hasn't been able to shake either. It's nothing he can't handle, it's just that it irks him. Images of cotoneaster berries and moths imprinted behind his eyelids, and he sees them flash across his vision every time he closes his eyes. He wants to ask Dr.Bloom what that feeling is, and why he has it, but he won't see her till next week. Will tries to slide himself into her shoes and hears her heels click assertively behind him on the cheap school tiles as they walk together in his mind.

"Excitement is what that feeling is called, Will."

Will readjusts his bag as he walks out of the main entrance after school. His mouth and eyebrows are jumbled wire at the mention of excitement.

"Uncomfortable sounds more relative," Will responds in his mind.

Dr. Bloom shrugs slightly, verging on unprofessional but Will imagines its the sort of thing Bloom would do. She's very comfortable with him and he her. He assumes it's because she realized that if she talked to Will more as an equal and not as a subject or patient, he would respond more positively to "treatment".

“One can be excited and uncomfortable at the same time. They can be mutually exclusive or inexclusive. That’s the beauty of excitement—it’s ability to be a positive emotion that will dance with both joy and fear. People do things all the time that make them uncomfortable in the hopes of a certain thrill or promise of excitement. It’s what makes us human.”

“What are you saying? What would I have to be excited about? I’m going to a kid’s house to see if his taste in books is as refined as his choice in clothes. There’s nothing to be excited about—it’s mediocre, if anything. He’s mediocre.” Will rejects, kicking at a pebble on the way to the spot he agreed to meet Hannibal.

Dr. Bloom looks like she’s about to say something, but doesn’t. Her heels fade away from his ears and when he stops near the bus station, across the street sits that recognizable shiny Rolls Royce. Will has to huff a sigh, readjust his backpack and blow a stray curl from his eyes. Before approaching the car, he makes sure no one he recognizes is near by. The driver sees him and steps out to open the door when Will decides to make a mad dash for the vehicle. He tries not to listen to his screaming brain, and just slides into the car as if it was his own. He doesn’t thank the man, fearing he’ll expose a stutter that only surfaces when his neutral expression is breaking.

The drive is silent and Will isn’t sure if getting into a car without having seen Hannibal, upsets or relieves him. The drive is a short distance. Hannibal’s home is more centered within Baltimore’s Arts District that Will never visits. Will was told once by his dad that they had no real place there except to deliver keys for fixed boats to the rich folks who were too lazy to come pick up their own keys from the docks. His dad would then roll his eyes, spit a piece of gum or phlegm on the road they were standing on in disrespect. Will didn’t pay the comment any mind; his father was trying to be the tough, and rugged proletarian he wishes his son would grow up to be.

Will shakes his head visibly as they pass fancy homes and condominiums. He sees people everywhere dressed like they came off magazines or jumped from the pages of the Top 10 Men and Women of Eastside. The houses slowly grow bigger and fancier, with some having sculptures or artisanal hedges. In the windows you can see grand pianos, elaborate lamp shades and expensive velvet curtains that made Will squeeze his backpack tighter in his lap.

When the car rolls to a gentle stop in front of the biggest and cleanest house on the block, Will has too look up high at its two floors, that reach to the sky like a small brick skyscraper, with a frown. It looms just higher than all the rest on the block and the yard is clean cut with no tacky extravagance. He clears his throat and begins to put his hand on the car door latch but not before the driver opens it wide for him, Will almost falling out of the car comically. The driver doesn’t say a word, but with a gloved hand gestures for Will to step out. The steps to the front door are thin cobbled slabs that lead to a gleaming red wood door with intricate carvings, around a large port hole, of angels surrounded by blooming roses.

“What the hell did I get myself into?” He breathes to himself, hesitant to knock.

Will hears the Rolls Royce pull away from the curb and he is left standing there, poised with his fist ready to knock on the door but can’t seem to find the right moment to do so. He turns all about him and sees no one roaming the neighborhood but feels like he’s being watched anyway. The houses must be judging him if not the people. There’s a sudden urge to take one

step back away from the door and walk down the steps to anywhere but here. He takes that step back and like a cause and effect scenario, the door opens to a familiar face anyway.

“Will. Your just in time. Please come in.” Hannibal greets, a dark entrance way enveloping his figure from behind the door like a cloak.

Will plays off his timid footing as if he was walking up the stairs instead of down, and merely nods in response before shuffling past Hannibal into a dimly lit hallway. The air smells of thyme and lemon. The scent is nothing short of delicious and positively foreign to his nose, making his stomach grumble unapologetically. The door closes behind them both and Hannibal takes the lead with a confident stride towards what Will assumes is the kitchen. He peaks past the two rooms off to the right and left that were decorated in dark colors of maroon or brown with center piece furnitures of green or turquoise Chinese satins. He refrains from exhaling a physical ‘wow’ as he follows after Hannibal.

“Your just in time to try something I just learned yesterday. Please, sit at the counter.” His host motions to the marbled black counter space of the island while walking around the other side to the stove.

This was all strange for Will Graham. He was in a foreign place with foreign smells and a foreign boy that was playing house. It was over stimulating and causing his palms to sweat with anxious warmth. He stared at Hannibal’s back with a funny expression. It honestly feels like watching a kid put his dad’s clothes on to do too good an impression of him.

“How old are you anyway?” The question pops from his thoughts and makes its way through the silence that had seated itself between them.

“16 later this year. What begs the question?” Hannibal responds casually amidst stirring bowls and finger testing sauces.

“I just...you just...seem much older,” Will admits.

There’s a light chuckle and a slight turn of Hannibal’s gaze to make eye contact with his guest that Will doesn’t grant him for more than a second before he turns to stare at the painting opposite him in the kitchen. Hannibal grabs a dish of toasted sunflower and prune-infused bread slices from the mini oven with a bubbling peanut-cashew butter sauce and a house-made marmalade jam of Colombian blackberries. Will’s stomach grumbles and his mouth waters at the thought of a warm peanut butter jelly finger sandwich.

“Please, try it. It’s a house recipe my culinary teacher serves to her nieces and nephews at holiday when they visit her. She says it’s a favorite of there’s. An odd ingredient they put in the jam to bring out a bolder, sweeter flavor is a small amount of boiled lamb’s blood. You can hardly taste it but it makes all the difference.”

Will put on a face of hesitance, but had no real qualms about eating anything put in front of him, odd or not. It was a glorified peanut and jelly and he couldn’t turn it down. He takes one politely and tries it in small bites while Hannibal leans on the counter expectantly. Will’s eyes sparkle instantly as he takes the first bite, and he can’t help licking his lip and curling his toes in his chaffed sneakers.

“Mm! I’ve never had this kind of jam before! What’s in it besides lamb blood?” Will exclaims, finishing the rest of the slice in a large bite.

“It’s a blackberry jam over a peanut and cashew infused butter. I had her teach me to make it. If you like it that much, I can see about making you a jar or two. I wouldn’t mind at all.” Hannibal answers, crossing his arms with a warm smile to make Will feel more comfortable. He read in a psychologists’ article it helps ease patients when they’re apprehensive.

After a moment of indulgence in watching Will eat something that indeed had a not-so-quiet lamb’s blood in it, he made a point to turn back to his other cooking without glancing Will’s way again to give him the privacy of snacking, “I hope you don’t mind if I prepare dinner? You are welcomed to stay if your family doesn’t mind? I appreciate company for a meal after we examine the book together. Dinner won’t take long to prepare.”

Will remembers that his “family” is gone for long hours again today, not that it truly matters any, and doesn’t give his decision another thought. Free food sounds wonderful and if it’s anything like the snacks, his stomach proves more powerful than his brain’s power to push him back home with anxiety as it’s only persuasive ally.

“I guess...I can stay. I don’t want to intrude at all...” Will devolves to hard pressing murmurs behind another slice of toast.

“Not at all, I was hoping you wouldn’t say no. It’d be a waste of a second serving.”

Will mumbles in agreement, taking yet another slice of toast while Hannibal picks up a conversation they left hanging in the air of the kitchen, busying his hands at the counter with a bowl of mashed tomatoes, lemon and herb.

“You know, I might seem older but it is only because my maturity, I cannot deny, is a rarity amongst my peers. I was gifted with the grandest ability of organization and focus. When I become passionate about something, I pursue it with all my attention. Therefore, I have become much more educated in fields such as art, language, cooking, and the science of the mind. I enjoy them and want to experience everything they have to offer to my full capacity. But I am not without faults. I catch myself being very much my age sometimes and I do make mistakes. I don’t hide it though. I feel we must experience and relish in the acts that makes us children so we can learn from ourselves and understand the kind of power we hold to become stronger adults.”

“Blind stubbornness, recklessness, the need for drama and over-reaction. All the things that make us children,” Will responds, spreading his fingers across the counter and lifting a finger and setting it down for every property he lists.

“They’re what makes us adults to,” The young host retorts, rolling out thin sheets of dough and cutting them with a neat precision similar to the lawn maintenance outside. Sliding hand made pasta into an already boiling stock pot filled with water, he continues his thought, “I think there’s nothing wrong with a little childishness as long as it’s not rude.”

Will doesn’t know what to make of that. He believes childishness goes hand in hand with selfishness. Something is telling him that Hannibal might be playing more than devil’s

advocate for childishness being an excusable sin.

“Hmm. Then humor me in my childish curiosity. What kind of mistakes does someone like you make?” Will inquires, trying to at least do Hannibal the service of being a somewhat decent conversation partner.

There’s a pause between movements from Hannibal, slightly set aback, and contemplative as he sets the burner on low and stirs the pasta gently.

“Plenty, and probably similar to ones you make in your day to day routine.”

Will narrows his eyes, resting his chin on his hands, looking at Hannibal’s back, “Like?”

Hannibal is trying to divert the conversation from this turn but, alas he was unaware just how manipulative Will is. He wouldn’t like bringing up the several times he’s tripped over his own shoes, and scuffed them or having put his briefs on backwards and didn’t notice it until duty called him to the bathroom. Nor will he disclose the several occurrences of him physically snapping a pencil or throwing an object in the privacy of his room out of sheer frustration. He sighs, shoving all those instances into the back of his mind and selecting a scenario slightly less personal.

“Well, for instance, the first time I rode a horse I stepped up on the saddle and got frightened by the height. I panicked and tried to step back down, but my foot got caught in the foot hold and I wound up on the ground, strung up by my leg. The horse felt my weight and began to walk in the opposite direction, dragging me along. I admit it is one of my weakest moments.”

Will laughs then, for the first time in what felt like ages. He can picture a prissy and stubborn Hannibal not wanting help up on the horse only to be caught like a shark in an ocean net. The horse handler yelling for the horse to stop, in fear that the young master might be injured while being dragged by his heel, and the boy cursing the sky, red from embarrassment.

Hannibal laughs to, whole heartedly. He can’t quite understand why; he never found that memory very funny before, but he still finds himself wanting to share the laughing fit with Will. Their laugh fills the room and embraces Hannibal with a comfort like being wrapped up in a blanket next to a crackling fire on a chilly night. He can’t control or explain the heat that rises to his face, but he blames the steam from the pasta he’s stirring. Through fits of laughter, Hannibal lets the pasta settle and heads to the fridge to pull a prosciutto and cheese petal plate out. He brims with pride at the decorative styling he chose, and places it front and center for Will to view in full. The plate looks like a miniature bouquet of flowers made of thinly sliced, salted meats and cheese. They are delicate, and the meat is translucently pink as if it were stained glass. Hannibal’s eyes don’t blink, waiting to catch every moment of Will enjoying meat selected, harvested and fermented by his own hand from weeks ago in Europe.

“I almost died that day. The handler told me I was lucky to not have been stepped on before he stopped the horse. I didn’t even enjoy horses at the time.” Hannibal comments, finishing off his laugh.

“Then why do it?” Will begs the question, rubbing a joyous tear from his eye.

“Ah, because someone I held very dear to me use to like them. I was determined to learn to ride a horse because they never got to.”

Will wants to ask, the curiosity scratching at the creases of his mouth, but he knows it isn’t his place to. There is a sudden change in atmosphere at the mention of this person and the bubbling of sauce and water seemed louder than the both of them, drowning the laughter away to sadness. He could hear small footsteps running around in the hallways behind him, and it made him squeeze his own thighs. Hannibal catches Will’s eyes scurry from there conversation to the hallways leading to nowhere Will knew, and he watches him intimately.

“What is it Will?”

“Oh!” He scratches the back of his neck, “It’s nothing. I thought I heard something, that’s all. You said we were alone and I got slightly nervous.”

“Yes, we are most certainly alone, don’t worry. Now, I feel like I’m owed a story since I’ve told you one of mine.” He affirms, gesturing to Will lightly, and stirring the pasta once more before coming to sit at the counter with Will to share the prosciutto.

“A story? I don’t think I have any real good ones.” Will shrugs.

“Then tell me a bad one.”

Will bites the inside of his cheek behind a hand holding a prosciutto flower, “Uh, alright. Well, my dad takes me fishing on his days off when we live nearer docks that have rivers out to the sea. We don’t talk much on the trips except to exchange hooks or bait or him yelling my way across the boat when one of us catches a fish. This one time, in the summer, we were out on the Silk River up in Massachusetts and we hadn’t had a bite all day. Now usually, I just need a line and stream and I’m just as happy, even if I don’t catch anything...but, my dad is less patient and was practically lunging into the water anytime a fish snagged. He kept scaring away all the fish but I couldn’t tell him that. Anyway, after about 6 hours of nothing, my line snags and we both freak out. I take hold of the line and I’m pulling and pulling. I’m telling you this fish was strong, it rocked our boat back and forth, but my dad didn’t help me once. He just watched and flung his arms around as if he was watching a boxing match with a lot of money on the table. He wanted me to be strong enough to pull the fish out myself.”

“And did you?”

“No. The boat rocked so hard and I tried so hard to not snap the line but my foot slipped on the bottom of the boat and it yanked the line in two. The fish swam the other way and I toppled over off the boat into the water with my fishing rod. I stayed under the water for a lot longer than I should have. I was....afraid that when I came back up for air, I’d see the cherry red face of my dad about to toss his fisher’s cap at me, telling me to swim to shore because he didn’t want to see me for the rest of the afternoon.”

Will pops the prosciutto flower with a cheese base into his mouth in one bite. Hannibal swallows hard trying not to laugh. He’s still not use to how much he enjoys watching others unknowingly consume the dead and he wants to laugh so loud that his face cracks a hair. To conceal his joyous secret torment of others, he follows suit and consumes a flower as well,

getting back to dissecting their conversation. It's rude to not be fully invested in a conversation.

"What happened when you came back up for air?"

"Nothing. My father sat on his end of the boat, watching where the fish swam away. He didn't look at me, didn't sooth or further ridicule me. I made the choice to swim to shore and go swimming at another bank of the river while my clothes dried off. It's bad when my dad yells or screams, and throws things...it's worse when he says nothing at all. See? It's not a very good story, but it stuck out the most to me."

Both weren't leaning on counters in a kitchen anymore. What laid beneath their arms were mossy boulders, wet and smelling of fresh river water. The water runnning with a gentle ease up stream and the trees are bright green, soaking in a full sun's warmth. They are alone on the rocky bank watching the river go by and listening for the wild life it brought with it.

"I think it's a good story. I doubt you didn't learn something from it. It sticks out from your mind because you were so certain a different outcome of events would have occurred. You wanted to be the man that caught the fish that your father didn't have the power to—Tell me, do you think catching that fish would have proved anything?"

Will looks out at the water and doesn't say anything. Hannibal's eyes roam over Will's dark haired curls in contrast to smooth, pinkish skin for what seems like the millionth time in an hour. He's tried to draw him from memory and can't quite seem to capture the stubborn and restless expression that Will always tends to wear. Hannibal is still practicing imprinting everything into his mind palace, so he can roam through it later. For now, he knows many parts of Will will remain a blur after he's gone from his presence today so he chooses to savor the moment, in particularly, the ones where Will disappears prosciutto behind hungry, young teeth.

"I think the results would have been the same whether I caught that fish or not. Upset that I didn't have the strength, or upset that I indeed had the strength to catch something he couldn't. The fish would have been my only proof that I was somehow better than him before he swallowed that to, and I'd be left with nothing again."

The quiet of the kitchen is like a cathedral. The world is quiet before god as everyone admits their sins, and Will feels chilled to the bone amongst the marbles and tall ceilings surrounding them. He's soaked in river water and weighted in his seat from drenched fishing gear. His hands are hot, folded in his lap. They sit together on a church bench, empty seats around them, and then Hannibal leans over to whisper something.

" I think your father sees you as a fragile tea cup, a relic from a life where he use to have nice things and receive love from his god, a man with a fish. It collides with his want to see a hammer and nail instead. Tools to build something new for the future."

Hannibal's tea cup sits back, and laugh loudly, surprised by the comparison. The poetry in it seemed too romantic to be said between children, but then again, was any of their conversations thus far really normal between children? He has to ask, "You think so? I wouldn't put it past him to be entirely honest. How do you see me?"

The words flow from his mouth like the smoothness of water, “A mongoose that wants to swallow all the snakes that slither by...but must be reminded that it doesn’t quite have all its teeth yet.”

“A baby mongoose? I remind you of an animal?”

“They worship no god, and are guided only by their hunger.”

Will doesn’t know what to say to that. He sits there, dumbfounded again, unsure if he’s having a weird, manic dream about a kid he swore he never would see again or if it was all real and the God he didn’t believe in had dropped a strange gift into his lap. There’s an abrupt smile, and pat on the back like they’d been friends for years from Hannibal to Will.

“Let me go get that book I promised you. If you don’t mind, could you stir the pasta two rotations and turn the heat off, it should be done.” And he leaves swiftly out of the kitchen into the dark corridor where Will heard the small footsteps before.

The boy left in the kitchen quizzically goes to the stove and shakes his head at the instructions given to him, “Two rotations? What the hell does that mean?”

He stirs the spoon in the pot twice and stares at the pasta bubbling in its foaming water of salt and oil with what smells like a hint of mint. Is that it? He hopes that’s it because that’s all he can guess a rotation could mean. What would stirring it precisely two rotation do? Could he stir it a third time and taste the difference? He snickers slightly at that. Turning the fire off, he surveys the counter with a finished saucepan, soft bread buttered on both sides with garlic, and meatballs as big as golf balls herded onto the saucepan, still steaming. Will’s stomach grumbles despite all his snacking. He makes his way to sit expectantly at the counter, flipping Hannibal’s last comment over and over and over again.

“Here we are. Exactly as I mentioned.” Hannibal slides the book to Will, exchanging it for the prosciutto platter and empty toast plate that he takes to the opposite counter to wrap or wash them.

Will skims through the first several introductory pages and settles on a paragraph discussing the degrees of trauma one goes through in relation to degrees of criminal conduct. Already, he’s absorbed in the pages and trying to soak up all the information he can before he has to give the book back. There are analysis on the effects of fatherless homes or double parental abandonment. Chart after chart showing the collection of juvenile delinquents being put into percentages based on their loss of love and acceptance. Empathy dissolving or never coming to fruition as an infant tends to lead to violent and secluded individuals. They crave affection or rise above the need for it, deifying themselves. Will thinks about the killer haunting Manassas and feels a sense of loneliness pang him, a sense of disconnect from his essential wants and needs. A thought sparks and he says it aloud, not being able to contain it.

“He’s creating an image of himself.”

“Hm?” Hannibal responds, turning back to his guest, saucing the pasta and meatballs.

“T-the killer. Not the one who killed Ms. Guilleres but the first one. He’s got to have a sister or several. He’s the only boy, and he can’t stand that he’s different. He’ll always be different no matter what he does so he decides to replace himself. He must make his new form. He has to be perfect. The only things he’s ever seen so perfect are the things girls are forced to love...Dolls. He must take the things that will make him liked, or at least to this killers thinking. He loves them too much to not be perfect for them. He had a mother who couldn’t love him like she loved her daughters, didn’t have a father he could cling to so he’s trying to force his way into being what he thinks is normal.”

“An interesting thought. It’s intimate and desperate. Childish, even.” Hannibal offers with a smirk, knowing his comment is a brilliant tie in to their previous banters.

Will doesn’t acknowledge any wit from the comment and presses forward,“Family pressure is the biggest push someone has to change or not change. If I were him, I mean, I’d...do anything within my power to fit in.”

“Would you? Fitting in does seem enticing in some ways, doesn’t it? Never questioned, never bothered, no second glances or surprising endings. Everything is predictable and easy.”

“It sounds like a dream.”

“That is until your on your death bed and you can’t bring yourself to remember anything of important value because you made sure there wasn’t. All you have are your dreams then. The ones that scare you, and the ones that tried to save you from your normality in the prospects of something more...” Hannibal trails off, placing two dishes in front of them at the island with a pairing of water for Will, and a fun-sized glass of dark red wine for himself before taking a seat himself.

“More what?” Will urges on.

“Beautiful.” Their eyes meet and Will sees shadows behind hazel-ruby eyes again that make his skin itch. It’s a burning and heavy-handed sensation that makes the hair on his neck stand on end, reaching for the curls coiled up behind his ears.

“There’s nothing remotely beautiful about my dreams.” Will states, matter of factly with a clearing of his throat, remembering a ghostly cabin with dark windows and pale faces made of dust, swirling behind the glass. Will knew someone like Hannibal probably wouldn’t understand. Routine and normality make his dreams seem less like a reality and more like a puff of flour, creating white shadows and leaving only speckles behind of their existence

They both pick up utensils and Will looks down at his plate, seeing a fancy arrangement of all the pieces of food he peaked over on the kitchen counter while Hannibal had gone away. It really was fancy spaghetti and meatballs—he wonders if it tastes remotely like the left over frozen spaghettis he got on occasion at school after the lunch rush.

“Really? I highly doubt that. But what dreams do you have then? Ugly ones?”

“Normal ones.”

Will proceeds to shovel pasta noodles into his mouth, using it as his excuse not to elaborate, hoping that Hannibal will forget about the question. He doubts it of course, and on cue, Hannibal carries on.

“In that context, normal could mean anything,” He says between bites, “When I first arrived in Lithuania’s countryside to live with my aunt, I had dreams that caused me to wake three or four times a night. By some’s standards they would label that a series of nightmares but to me, it was normal. Merely dreams that I would later discover were trying to awaken me to the reality of who I was or rather, am.”

Will thinks about this as he chews perfectly cooked pasta, and bites away at soft and wonderfully seasoned meat. He doesn’t think he’s ever had meatballs this good and he thinks that the spaghetti he’s been eating at school is nowhere close to what this spaghetti tastes like. He imagines the pasta at school is made with gelatin molds in the shape of noodles and topped with over processed tomato sauce only to simulate some fuzzy idea of what spaghetti might taste like, created by someone whose never had spaghetti before. He hunts for the garlic bread on his plate and nearly swallows it whole when Hannibal isn’t looking directly at him. The garlic bread is probably his favorite.

On the other side of his train of thought, he hopes that what Hannibal implies about dreams isn’t true across the board...for what could that say about Will? The dead haunt him in his sleep and the only blood he sees are on his hands despite never having killed anyone. What could that mean? Maybe Hannibal might know but he knows it’s years too early to even broach the topic.

“Oh? And what have you discovered? Who are you?” Will asks, between fork fulls of pasta, and meat stabbed together.

Hannibal smiles this small smile, that Will now decides is a childish one, as if he is hiding a special secret behind busy teeth, “Would you like to find out?”

Will puts his fork down momentarily to drink water, throat having gone cinematically dry. He catches himself about to say, ‘Maybe’ when he remembers then that he is suppose to be uninterested in conversations and uninterested predominantly in Hannibal or what he has to say. Shit. That kind of went out the window now didn’t it? He has to inwardly laugh at himself. He got so caught up in the battle of word play and symbolism that he forgot he was suppose to be building a fort for himself instead.

“I bet I wouldn’t find anything truly interesting under all the expensive clothes and parlor tricks.” Will says offhandedly, folding his arms in front of his plate and leaning forward to rest a full stomach against the counter. He isn’t going to give Hannibal the true pleasure of giving a straight forward answer. He rarely gives anyone that pleasure.

Hannibal’s eyebrows shoot up with interest at such a challenge. He manages to keep the rest of his face within his emotional boundaries for now, but drums one of his hands against his thighs in excited intrigue.

“You want to place bets? I’d endeavor in a wager if that interests you in the least.” He responds, settling the electric thrum from his palm and fingers with a tight, rough squeeze to

his own knee. He focuses on the steady pressure and pain of it to hold back a sudden urge to reach across the table and rip Will's ear clean from the side of his face with his teeth. Maybe that'd be enough to find himself interesting, Hannibal thinks.

"Alright. What do I get if I really do find your character is as boring as I say it is?"

Hannibal thinks for a moment, before a light bulb goes off, "Ah, I'll give you this book, and I will promise to never converse or associate myself with you again if you so choose. That seems sufficient enough."

Will rubs his chin, "Gee, that is a pretty good wager. What would you want anyway? I don't really have anything that you could possibly want or couldn't get yourself."

"Don't be ridiculous. I ask for your good company until I go back to Europe, if you'll humor that as my prize."

Will leans back, neck like a scared turtle, scrunched between his own shoulders at Hannibal's request. Forward, Will recalls, he's very forward. Hannibal gives his best non-threatening smile, scrunching his nose a tad in enjoyment seeing Will uncomfortable. It's refreshing to interact with someone who is guiltlessly honest and unafraid of his own opinions despite whether it pleases him or not. It's genuine emotion which is rare amongst Hannibal's social circle and Hannibal is finding that he craves it like nothing else.

"I...don't see why not?"

"Fair enough then. Any rules?" Hannibal inquires, his inner self smiling with a grin as toxic-dripping with glee as the devil's.

"Rules? Well, you can't buy my opinion that's for sure." Will exhales, pushing curls from his face.

"I doubt you'd even let me try."

"Your damn right...but other than that, I can't think of any rules."

Hannibal merely nods, already knowing that such an open-ended wager such as this one leaves a field of possibilities for him to take advantage of. The Devil resumes eating, slower in his consuming of such a simple, yet fine meal. He just started adjusting his palette and senses to wines, taking the time now to swirl his small glass of red wine before inhaling its scent and indulging a sip. He refuses to cringe at the bitter flavor that his tongue isn't use to, followed by ghostly flavors of citrus and oak. The delicate flavors and variety of vintages and brands is exactly what Hannibal loves about wine—he just wishes it was a little easier on his taste buds as a beginner.

"Do you actually like wine?" His companion huffs curiously, looking at Hannibal's movement around the glass.

"I enjoy the act of tasting and dissecting wines. Especially if they have a good partner."

"Yeah sure, but do you actually like drinking it?"

Hannibal's lip rests over the lip of the glass, he gives Will a side glance and murmurs, "No."

"You really are weird." Will shakes his head, curls bouncing slightly with incredulity.

"And so are you. I guess we're more similar than previously assumed."

"We'll see about that."

Hannibal hums playfully, "We sure will."

Will goes back to the book, not minding that Hannibal takes significantly longer to finish his meal. Hannibal himself doesn't seem like he's in any hurry to finish just because his guest inhaled his either so it isn't as awkward as Will thought it would be. Neither of them mind the quiet that settles over them. It's almost comfortable, Will thinks. The idea of sitting in this silence, reading a book or eating with someone else who is just as comfortable creates that familiar squirming warmth in his lower gut. His abused sneakers dance on the stools foot bar, trying to shake the feeling out through his legs and into the ground.

"Chapter 16 is kind of confusing." Will comments, trying to take his mind off the spreading warmth hovering over his stomach and thighs.

Hannibal chews through a meatball, and ducks his head to peer at the corner of the book while Will leans away in the same motion, pushing the book towards him, and keeping their personal spaces intact, "What about it is confusing? I've been reading that book personally and haven't gotten quite that far yet."

"There's a whole chapter in here discussing the psychology behind sociopaths and their methods. They say they are cold and heartless but have at least some ability to acknowledge guilt. It says that their main motive is to try and relive the passion that was found in killing their first victim. I mean, I might think that's true for some cases but....how could they put everyone under that umbrella? That sort of broad statement is how criminals slip through the cracks. Take our Manassas puppeteer or whatever the hell they want to call him, he does what he does for no one but others. He wants to blend in so he can disappear and be what everyone else wants him to be. He kills with guilt in his heart. He doesn't think he's better than anyone else, he just wants what everyone else has. He wants acceptance. What kind of killer do you call that?"

"A sensitive sociopath?" Hannibal offers.

"A sensitive sociopath....I don't know how to categorize that kind of crazy."

"Neither do I. Ironic, isn't it? A man craving categories and labels but the only two people whom I feel capable of understanding him, cannot place a label or category on him because what he is, doesn't have one."

"I find it...almost humorous in the most bitter way possible."

The night is cool and dark when Will finally leaves Hannibal's home. Hannibal doesn't take no for answer when he offers that his driver, Manny take him home. Will is too tired to argue past the initial offer and rebuttal. He finds himself leaning heavily against the door of the car, staring out the window and he's exhausted all of a sudden. He isn't sure why, but his limbs are heavy. He can only describe the feeling as something akin to that heavy exhaustion after having a full-day's worth of work and sweat behind him coupled with a nice pat on the back as his reward from one his father's oil stained hands. It's a bone-tired kind of feeling that numbs him and he feels less like his usual ball of static, and more like a gooey ball of play-do. Weird.

The colors of the street lights and gas stations that stream-line Will's vision are all he wants to occupy his mind. He feels wrung out and left to dry on a wire, his thoughts slipping from him into the air. Will cant deny himself the satisfaction of a buzz-less mind. That electric and worming feeling that had bugged him all morning has dispersed like shattered glass. He hums along to quiet music on the radio, off key and care-free.

Back at the Lecter house, Hannibal finishes the last of the dishes, and takes the two hidden prescription bottles from the cabinet, reading eszopiclone and escitalopramnd on the labels, and his text book into the living quarter. He puts the book back in its home on the third wall to wall shelf, two rows up next to two almanacs and a rendition of the Odyssey in greek. Hannibal hums, in tune to Toccata and Fugue in D Minor that plays from an antique record player in the room as he goes to a full-bodied medicine cabinet to put the two bottles back in their homes as well. Granted, he feels slightly guilty for putting medication in Will's food before even discussing wagers and rules and etc, but what he doesn't know can't hurt him... that much. He is moving chess pieces on a board in his cranium and is sure the prescription he administered in Will's food will put him not only at ease, but in a position to be more inclined to spend more time with his person.

"You will come to enjoy and depend on my company whole-heartedly, Will Graham." He murmurs, amongst his hums, brushing the faces of the bottles he's placed back on the shelf before briskly leaving the room to formulate more of his game.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy the long chapter!
Let me know if anything is confusing, and structure or language critique is much appreciated. Thanks. I'm very self conscious about my story and whether it's boring or not. Haha.....

Interlude

Chapter Notes

> Sorry it's taken me quite a while. I decided to add an interlude because I thought it'd be cool to have a short breather before the long haul. I'll post both together, but I kind of enjoy writing Alana's slow dissections and observations of Will's rollercoastered emotions separate from Will's life interacting with Hannibal. Like seeing two completely different perspectives of the same person and the same interactions.

"So, tell me about this friend of yours, Will."

Will doesn't fidget like he always does when he's in Alana's presence. He isn't relaxed but he can't seem bothered to express his anxiety through physical means at the moment: the chair he sits in is more comfortable than he can remember, and he constantly feels this tug of fatigue despite not being able to sleep for two days.

"He lets me hang out at his house, and cooks for me. I spend a lot of time there now. He's home schooled and doesn't really have a lot of friends his age—so he says anyway." Will says, thinking about how he couldn't go visit Hannibal today because his dad would be home fixing electrical boards for sonar units in a big fancy boat that pulled into the harbor a couple days ago. It made something bloom in his chest to see the almost annoyed expression that spilled from behind an indifferent facade that Hannibal usually wore when Will told him he couldn't come over.

"Cooks for you? That's quite sweet of him," Jokingly she adds, "Is he any good?"

Will doesn't laugh, but he nods his head, "Way better than my dad, that's for sure. He's messed up a couple times apparently, and even threw our food out once because he said it was awful. I liked everything he's made so far, despite what he says. I mean, it's kinda funny how he thinks I'd know the difference between a bad foie gras pate and a good one? He thinks too highly of me..."

"This friend of yours makes you foie gras? That's some friend you have, Will. How does someone like that, who thinks highly of you intern, make you feel?"

"Uncomfortable. I feel like I should start acting more like him and maybe do things he likes more but...I don't know the first thing about Dante or, or there's this other guy he likes....I can't even remember his name, but you get what I mean."

"Don't you think perhaps that he enjoys your company because your different from him?" Dr. Bloom asks.

“Maybe? He’s never told me why he was so adamant about us hanging out when we first met. I think we’re playing a game.” Will shrugs, slouching ever so slightly in his chair.

Alana takes note of the easing position, the dark circles ever darker under her patient’s eyes and this overall change in Will’s demeanor. She can’t quite put her finger on it but something is different again. It’s too soon to tell what it is, and whether it’s a good or bad sort of change but it’s there. Alana does feel like where they took a step forward, for whatever reason, Will took a step to the side.

She pushes, “What sort of game?”

Will shrugs again, “I’m not sure yet, but I feel like we’re playing chess all the time. He’ll say something and I’ll have to counter. He’ll do something that I’m not use to, and I’ll have to counter again.”

“Sounds like he’s testing your boundaries.”

“Something like that, I guess. He’s weird and he swears he’ll get me interested enough in his games that I’ll play along at my own accord. Or spur the game on on my own but....”

“But?”

“I’m not interested.”

Dr. Bloom sits back in her chair. She wants to smile but knows she can’t, “Not interested? It doesn’t sound like that to me. It sounds like you enjoy watching him climb over fences and walls to see you. He sounds like he’s wondering if you’d ever do the same.”

Will doesn’t respond. He’s already climbed a couple just by going to Hannibal’s home and expecting to go there now instead of asking if he could. She continues in his stead.

“And how did you meet if he doesn’t have mutual friends, and is home schooled?”

Will looks off to the side, seeing the blue creature that haunts the corners of his mind more frequently now a days, “We met outside of a grocery store. I had dropped my book and didn’t notice. He came looking for me to give it back. He spurred a conversation and...and I feel like we’ve been having that same continuous conversation ever since.”

Will still hasn’t told Alana anything about the creatures that creep around his mind space. He still doesn’t talk about his nightmares or the murders that repeat for him like movies behind closed eyes. He’ll hint to them sometimes or ask hypotheticals about someone else when they’re really about him, but he’s decided he can’t be seen by someone like Alana. Alana wants to fix him because she believes something is wrong with him. She wants to give him medication, and do brain games. It’s textbook curing that people read about in the psychology column of the newspaper. What Will fears is that if Alana dips her hand into Will’s true brain space, she’ll find officially that he is incurable. He’s trying to prevent the day when he’s sat down unknowingly at a doctors desk, and told that what he has inside cannot be scrubbed away with soap and medicine. The things that he thinks and the things that he never stops

seeing are just part of who he is and not a symptom of some rare disease that Will has been harboring. His hands tremble whenever he thinks about the day that would happen.

“Perhaps you’ve met your match? This person maybe sensed you’d never have continued the conversation past a thank you and a goodbye if this friend didn’t push you. We all need pushes, Will. They help form us into the adults we want to be. I’m glad you are discovering more people who see you and want to be around you. It builds self esteem and sooner or later, you’ll begin to feel more normal.” Alana affirms, scribbling some more notes.

He wonders if Hannibal does see him. He’d have to ask in some cryptic way if Hannibal sees him clearer than he sees himself. And if that’s even possible to begin with. He knows Hannibal might know, or has a book that’d give him a knowing, poetic answer.

“Let’s talk about your physical well-being? How do you feel today?” Alana asks clinically, but genuinely interested. She doesn’t expect a different answer than the one Will likes to give, which is ‘fine’, but maybe it will spur a different answer some day.

“I’m more tired than I’ve ever been before. I have to admit that.”

Some day is closer than she thought.

“Oh? What sort of symptoms do you feel you are showing?”

Will rubs his eye then, “Well, I’m always tired but when I lay down to sleep...I can’t, and then, uh, I feel like I zone out sometimes to. I’ll look at a clock and it’s 1:20 but then I look again in what feels like seconds to see it’s nearly 2. Sometimes...I’ll fall asleep but not even remember falling sleep. It still feels like I’ve been awake doing stuff and just can’t fathom what it was I was doing before I find myself somewhere I don’t remember going. And I see __“

He bites his tongue, holding back the near slip of exposing himself. He was going to say that he sees people from the front page or the crime column, long dead, walking around school or at home with him.

“You see what?”

“I—uh, I see...myself getting more agitated and on edge from not sleeping. It’s effecting my school work I think, and I think the stress is causing me to zone out. I also feel very sluggish and heavy some nights, and other nights not. I don’t know what to do.”

“I can perhaps prescribe you medication for the fatigue and the insomnia. It sounds like it’s a very radical change in energy levels. Are you taking any anti-depressants?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I don’t take medication usually. Not even for allergies...Are the prescriptions expensive?”

Alana pauses. She almost forgot Will’s father doesn’t even know his son is going through therapy. Will doesn’t want him to know, and so, Will can’t get permission for medications

either. Nor would he get so far as to get money for the prescription either. Dr. Bloom contemplates doing something highly unethical.

“They are a little expensive, but I might be able to pull a few strings for you if you could just get me the phone number to your primary doctor? Could you do that for me?”

Will nods, but inwardly has no idea where or who his primary doctor is. Does he even have one? He might. He does go for a yearly check up, but he thinks it’s only because the school mandates that all parents do that for the flu shot and such.

“Good. And would you like to talk about your father today? How does he feel about you staying at someone else’s house much more than you ever have?” She must ask because she finds it odd that Will leaves for hours at a time and hasn’t been confronted on the issue.

“I always tell him that I’m going to the museum like I use to....or I don’t tell him at all. His hours at work are long and so is the drive home when it’s traffic hour. As long as I’m home by 8:30 or so, he doesn’t know. There was one day I fell asleep on the roof while doing homework and he had come home. I don’t think he knew where I was but he never mentioned not seeing me that night. I never got in trouble. I don’t think he cared or at least, was too tired to care.”

“Because of your father’s demeanor, it’s perceived long hours are whittling down his ability to stay self aware once in the confines of a safe space. Your father has a hard time saving room emotionally to be a parent when the hours are long combined with a personality that dictates he doesn’t need to communicate efficiently to get the job done.” From what she’s gathered, Will’s father is a conservative, and brash sort of person. Isn’t abusive or neglectful by choice, but simply doesn’t have the strength to be the parent Will needs him to be. This isn’t about Will’s father at all, but she feels if she better understands the dynamic the two have, she can better understand where Will is coming from.

“Yes....it’s why he drinks sometimes. He’s quiet most days, but yells a lot on others. Lately, I haven’t seen him too much. He’ll leave out a couple extra slices of toast for me in the morning when he leaves earlier than my school bus...and sometimes he’ll poke his head in my room to make sure I’m there, but I pretend to be asleep. I don’t know why. I just always throw myself under the covers and shut my eyes. Sometimes I feel that if I’m asleep, he then has the ability to drink or watch tv in the privacy of his secluded consciousness without having to worry about me seeing a weak side of him? But I see everything anyway.”

“And how does that knowledge make you feel?”

“In the way. I see parents with kids at the park or the library or at the museum, and most would say they’re off time or relaxation time is spent doing something with their kids. They enjoy their time together where as my dad...doesn’t want to.”

“What about the times he brings you to the boat yard or the times you’ve told me that you go fishing together?”

“Necessity. I’m novice enough that he’ll always look like the expert. It’s why he never invites his friends to fish with him, and why he’ll always bring me to work with him. I’m novice

enough that I can be taught a lot, but experienced enough I won't piss him off....most of the time, anyway."

"That seems stressful. Your a very very bright boy, I imagine you have to pretend not to know things just to keep your father satiated." Dr.Bloom says, making more conclusions upon hearing a lot of this side of the Graham Family for the first time. It opens a lot of windows.

"It just taught me to watch. It's how I survive."

Alana's patient sighs again, now officially having exhausted himself in conversation. He's closing back up and she watches him mentally do so.

"Do you see yourself as a survivor, Will?"

Will thinks about Hannibal then. When they met, Wills instincts carried him toward the idea that Hannibal is a hunter. He presents himself so in demeanor, in aura, in fashion and everything else. Will isn't a hunter....He knows this....despite whether he wants to be or not. He isn't a survivor either. Survivors have to be strong or at least lucky enough to live, and continue to want to live. He doesn't see himself as either strong nor lucky.

"I see myself just not as dead as everyone else around me."

Behind Will's chair, he's surrounded by several unmoving people. All glazed over, pale and lifeless as they still their faces to look onward and outward. Dr. Bloom sees none of this and therefore would ask Will to elaborate, but their timed session is up and Will's next class period starts in 5 and a half minutes.

"We'll put a pin in it right there then and pick up in a couple weeks? Im afraid I'll be missing your session next week due to an overlap in scheduling from John Hopkins. I could possibly get you a stand in therapist if you so choose?" She offers gently, watching Will stand to leave.

"No, I'll wait. Good bye Dr. Bloom." Will confirms and then says his goodbye with a heavy slowness like the conversation between them took every ounce of his energy.

Alana is definitely worried about him now. She'll have to do a bit of digging on her own to see if she can get medication to Will, secretly.

A Pale Faced Moon

Chapter Notes

I changed this chapter some and made it longer. If anyone read the old chapter before I changed it, I hope the addition is nice and worth a reread! :-)

Most of the changes are at the very end.

Another murder happens like clock work. It's the second killer again but everyone still calls him Geppetto. Will knows it's not him for the same reason as the last murder, but this time, he also notices more experimentation...a little more adventure in taste and style. In the dead of night, a guard making rounds at a small, international Art Museum discovers a corpse. It was half of one man and half one woman, similar build, and similar features. Fraternal twins, sewn in the middle with lacerations around the neck like they had been choked with thin wire. The cameras in the museums are grainy and ill-fitted to identify the intruder anymore than the evident fact that it was a rather short male that broke into the museum. The ordeal sent the art society into a raging anger. In the paper, the museum director gave polite condolences, and began to make demands of the police to ensure their collection was in no way endangered by the 'fiasco' on top of catching the lunatic.

The corpse was found seated in front of a painting on loan from the MOMA of Judith Beheading Holofernes by Francesco del Cairo. A beautiful piece, Will thought when he found the painting in one of Hannibal's many books in his study. Hannibal told him the story of Judith, decapitating the head of Holofernes to save her home from Assyrian conquerors. This second killer has exposed to Will that he's threatening the first killer's throne and hunting ground. He's telling the first killer, a half Judith half Holofernes, what he must do to save his kingdom from him, a Holofernes. The copy cat killer is taunting a fellow hunter. It's arrogant and smug, but not ignorant. He knows it'll fuel the anger that's boiling inside the Geppetto Killer enough to possibly act rash and destroy himself. Ironic, it takes a killer using himself as bait to catch a killer. Will doesn't get much farther than that for awhile in his processing...his mind has been acting funny lately.

As Jack talks at him during lunch time, Will feels like he's on autopilot more so than any other time before. In this inescapable, hazy state of mind, Jack was able to coax him into meeting a few residents of his social circle. From what Will's dulled senses could grasp, these friends were all slightly off-kilter by the new face amongst them but not in any way that was necessarily unfriendly. They are all bright and loud in personality, which cushions a lot of the awkward atmosphere that weighs down on Will's shoulders. The warmth from them all makes Will feel like he's slowly melting to nothing. His face has a small sheen of sweat to it despite not having had gym class yet, and they are currently seated next to the air conditioners in the cafeteria.

“What do you think, Will?”

Jack asks at last, the entire conversation escaping Will’s attention. Will blinks, eyebrows scrunching at the ambiguous question, “What?”

“What do you think?” There’s an expectant pause for answer and when nothing comes to Will, Jack rolls his eyes, “What did you think about the game last night? It was 4 - 0, your dad must have been hollering at the moon from such a win.”

Will didn’t watch the game last night...he was at Hannibal’s again for like the 10th time since they’ve met a couple weeks ago,“Ah, sorry, no, I-I didn’t watch the game last night. I was studying for that exam in Ms. Katz’ class. My...dad was working late.”

Beverly Katz, Will thinks is her name, raises her hands up, “What a night to pick to study! You missed the most amazing game of the season! Bases full, 3 outs and Tom Shall comes to bat. The Jets know they’re fucked and those idiots try to curve him a slimey one, but he doesn’t bite it. They tried to walk him, but he slams it out of the park on the 2nd pitch. That sucker goes so high the crowd can’t even see it anymore, and it lands on the left side, almost to the nosebleed seats! My mom and I were losing are absolute minds yesterday!”

Jimmy Price rolls his eyes, “Guys, it’s baseball for crying out loud.”

Beverly scrunches her nose grossly, “Your point, Priceless?”

“My point is is that every time you retell one of your game stories you always hype it up as if it isn’t a bunch of assholes standing around and waiting until some guy hits a ball a little too hard with a stick. And also, don’t call me that, my mother is the only one who gets to call me that.”

Brian Zeller almost jumps from his seat to defend Beverly and the great sport of baseball, “Hey! Baseball is an artisanal sport. It takes hard work and dedication to get to where those guys are. Best in the states, maybe the whole world! And I like Bev’s stories. They should hire her to do the official commentary.”

“Oh quit sucking Beverly’s dick.” Price retorts, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

Everyone seems to laugh a little too hard at that except for Zeller and Will, who probably would have laughed if his social anxiety and current vegetative state didn’t prohibit him from doing so. Jack takes the reigns on the conversation, back to pulling Will into the conversation again, despite Will not having the mental capacity for social interaction, “Will once told me that his dad worked for Fenway Park and they were able to see the Horns vs the Copperheads from the roof of the stadium.”

“That was a good game! What was it like seeing it live from there??”

There’s another pause, and Jack has to give a prompting shove with his elbow before Will stutters out strings of nothing, trying to catch words from the pools of his mind with bare hands, “Um, well, it was almost surreal I think. When you...watch that stuff from way up

high it almost feels like watching a flea circus. Like they're playing just for you. The crowd is loud and it echoes against the sky like the roof of an opera house. You can see the gameplay clearly and how all the players move together against the pop fly of a ball, or a base being stolen."

Beverly sighs almost dreamily, "What a way to watch baseball."

Zeller shakes his head, "I for one, don't believe it's all that great. Are you saying the top of the stadium is better than watching base side?? No way."

Jack huffs, "Of course he isn't saying that, but just being at Fenway is way cooler than anywhere we have been, base side or not."

"Not for long, my mom is taking me and my brothers to Hawaii for a baseball exhibition. They'll be playing a scrimmage game there with some prime time Japanese legends!"

The group gasps in unison with the exception of Will who would be surprised, envious, and curious about such a trip, but his face feels like its made of lead. He remains entirely expressionless throughout the initial shock from such an announcement. It was even too much for him to really eat, only having eaten half of his peanut butter and jelly, and finding it would take too much energy to peel the banana that Jack got for him from the cafeteria line.

Instead of listening to them ask a million questions about Mrs. Katz and Beverly going to Hawaii, Will hung on the thought of how sitting from such a height at Fenway made him feel like God looking over ants. When he watched games there he felt they played for his enjoyment and he sometimes would pretend he could pick up the players he didn't like and...

"And? And do what? Show them your power?"

Will gulps at the sound of the voice that acknowledges him, calm and familiar in his mind, "...Y-yes."

"It's only natural." The voice says in agreement.

"But it's still wrong." Will says firmly, his legs dangling over the edge of Fenway stadium's roof, and not a cheap, plastic cafeteria bench.

A pair of legs, covered in dark violet slacks, with a pair of Italian dress shoes joins Will's faded jeans and sneakers. This well dressed pair of legs swings gently, out of sync with Will's legs.

"Wrong and right are inapplicable labels for actions and feelings that are...shall we say involuntary."

Will doesn't respond but wants to ask what he means. He looks up and sees the bone chilling face of the dark creature, with antlers shaped almost like a demon's. It speaks to him, playful and vicious in tone, "Ask me, Will."

"What do you mean by involuntary? Surely you don't mean...."

“Oh but I do. I’m saying it’s part of YOUR nature, Will. It’s who you are.”

“No, no it’s not. Stop it. I’m not really like that.”

“Then why do you have those kind of thoughts? They’re not normal thoughts, you know. You aren’t normal, but neither am I, and that’s just fine.”

“It’s not!” Will screams, but the finely dressed creature is already gone and so is Fenway.

The lunch bell rings furiously and it jolts Will from his blank space, back into the yellowing cafeteria, filled to the brim with kids. He shakes his head, and stands with the group in unison to head back to classes. He’s trying to nurse a headache with manual presses to his temple and squint his eyes to focus better at his surroundings.

“Say, don’t you have Ms. Gumb next? Walk with me. You don’t really talk much, huh? You got Aspergers? It’s okay if you do. My aunt has it and she’s doing just fine.” Beverly says bluntly after waving or fist bumping the rest of the troop goodbye. Will can barely keep up with her stream of thought as she assumes things about him while he battles whatever is wrong with him.

Will squints more, offended to the utmost degree, “I’m not—I don’t....”

She shrugs already having lost interest in the subject all together, “Like I said, it’s fine. Anyway, I’ve heard your kind of obsessed with the murders and kidnappings going on in Manassas. I actually wanted to talk to you about them.”

Will musters the ability to laugh, sarcastically to boot, stopping amidst the sea of children in the hallway, his back like a rock wedged between crashing waves,“You can tell Jack that this was real funny but I’m kind of fed up with people making fun of me for being the only one in probably all of Manassas who actually wants to catch this sick maniac. I’ve already got enough attention inside and outside of school for my ‘hobby’. You can quit pretending like your interested—it’ll make it easier on both of us.”

Beverly blinks, stopping mid step, shocked. Her mouth pressing into a thin frown, she marches back after the soggy, hot blanket that is Will Graham and grabs him by the shoulders with strength he hardly knew she had.

“Alright listen, asshole. I haven’t known you for more than like 30 minutes and more than half that time was you being nothing but a nail with a point at both ends. What’s your damage? I’m being serious and you better take me seriously or I’ll make sure you regret it. Manassas is a small town with small minded people but I’m not one of them. If I ask you something it’s because I actually care so don’t mistake me for someone who just wants to yammer in your ear.” Her arms cross in front of her sternly, with an upturned chin.

Will was suddenly embarrassed. He hadn’t really been put in check like that before by anyone. Everyone else runs away or beats him within an inch of his life. He nods, rubbing the back of his neck. There’s an apology, genuine, but quiet and then he remembers there’s a budding headache spreading from his temple to temple and behind his ears.

“Alright—since we got that cleared out of the way, I want to ask what you think about it. I’ve been doing my own research on this nut job and I think that it’s got to take some good love and care to kidnap these girls and house them somewhere for a long while. When he sets the scenes he does, it has to take at least two to three days to fully install them. I thought the last woman was a little strange... and then this most recent one? Almost completely unordinary comparatively speaking. He’d never done just one victim in a scene before and the lady from the one previous was older but maybe he’s trying to find new ways to spice up his life,” Beverly states, using gestures to speak and talking like a prime time investigator on tv.

Will listens carefully and contemplates, rubbing his chin despite his stress, “I see what your saying and your right. Whatever he has to do to these girls, it’s got to be a quiet location, somewhere these girls aren’t use to and it’s got to be secluded enough to make a mess. I’d have to see all locations around where the excess body parts were discarded. A guy with a box of body parts can’t really make it anywhere necessarily far. The smell would be awful if it’d been awhile. As for the last two victims, it’s not the same killer. I know that for sure—it can’t be. It’s too similar and dissimilar to be the same guy.”

“My dads got maps from all over because he hikes a lot. I think I might be able to dig one up of the area from when the boxed parts were found. I was also looking at what day all his scenes were set and he’s following a lunar cycle when he takes the girls and sets them up.”

His epiphanies or realizations hit him like falling stars, dying casts of light that are suppose to be whimsical but once they’ve been pulled to earth they’re nothing but hot rocks, helping no one achieve their wishes or dreams, “Or it’s the menstrual cycle. The killer is obsessed with women and what makes them women. The victim showed up on a full moon. This other killer knows this too, it’s too much to be coincidence to have a victim pop up more than once on a full moon. If we’re right on the money, we should be expecting a victim this month. The sky is forecasted to be clear that day. There was no room to place his prize when someone else took the stage...so what did you do with her then? The world can’t see her if she isn’t as rosy as the day I killed her.”

Beverly didn’t catch the last strains of thought and steps closer to ask what he said but Will looks around him, seeing water drip from the cracks and crevices of all the walls and lockers. His headache deafens the noises around him and he can only hear leaky water and his heart pounding.

Will drifts away entirely then, it’s been easier this week to drift away. Beverly’s face, unsure and slight with worry, is mute in the cold black back of his mind. He’s thinks about life, and death—sees it form from animals to water and ghosts of dust. He swallows loudly in his own ears and begins to perspire. The clup clup of stag hooves move him to step onto carpeted floor with his bare feet. Will is in the hallway of his house and it’s dark, only illuminated by the blue and white light of a television screen with Singing in the Rain playing on repeat in the background. He’s breathing hard, seeing a figure sit in his father’s chair facing away from him that’s too small to be his father. There’s a bottle in his hand that he didn’t know he had and when he gets close to the figure, it’s head turns and it’s the dark, blue figure he’s seen before. It stares at him like it’s caught him doing something he shouldn’t be doing, but does nothing else, before turning back to the television. It willfully ignores Will and his intentions,

asking him in gesture to do as he pleases. Will likes that...and raises the bottle over his head —

“Will? Will? William? Are you there?”

Will is all bleary eyes and confused. He’s not sure where he is and it frightens him to hear cars pass by when just a second ago he was at school surrounded by endless chatter. From the blurs of colors, and the blanket of sweat over his eyes, he sees a familiar face of high cheek bones and a white dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves. His skin crawls quick like spider legs upon seeing a dark skull come into focus only illuminated by a focused hallway light from inside the dark home.

“Why...why are you at my school?” Will’s voice hardly croaking out the question.

Hannibal looks around, almost comically, a micro smile playing at his lips, “Will, you are at my door step.”

“I don’t...”

The expression drops entirely from Hannibal’s face, having realized why Will is in front of him, “You have no recollection of coming here? Or how you got here?”

Will shakes his head but it makes him so dizzy he sways on his feet. Hannibal is ready to catch him before he falls over and leads him inside gently. Immediately changing into the fussy persona he wishes to portray for Will, he takes his jacket and his backpack from him and puts them away in the coat closet.

“Come to the living room if you can and lay down. I’ll get you some water. Have you eaten today?” Hannibal asks, in an even, and practiced tone with just a hint of worry.

Will opens his mouth to say something but immediately loses the ability to put words together. There’s a headache pulsing at his frontal and parietal lobe like his skull is close to bursting like a blister. He squints trying to spit words out but resolves to a half shake of his head when the strain is too great. Hannibal hums in response. He lays him down on the comfiest couch of the three that are in the living room before striding himself to the kitchen to fetch water. Hannibal finds he has to stand there for a moment, leaning against the counter by his palms contemplating the situation. He admits that he knows the side effects of the medications he’s been administering for about two weeks can cause hallucinations, heightened by a double dosage, but apparent sleep walking and signs of heavy fatigue or headaches is new. He wonders if there’s something else that could be wiggling around in Will’s brain that Hannibal isn’t aware of or if this is what happens when treading new waters with unorthodox medicinal treatments. He shrugs to himself and takes a large glass of water to the living room, and goes to couple it with a single aspirin from one bottle, and an unmarked pill from another that looks identical to the aspirin.

“Here you are, Will. Please sit up for a moment so you can drink these down. Im afraid it’s a little short notice for me, but I’ll try to fix you up something to eat so you don’t continue to fight whatever it is you have on an empty stomach,” Hannibal informs him.

Will can only acknowledge with the shift of tired eyes from somewhere distant, to Hannibal's face, and back to the distant and quiet space Will allows himself now. Hannibal hums again before leaving to the kitchen. He's decided that he will make a quick salmon fillet with a pistachio and ginger sauce. Hannibal has left over couscous that he'll sauté with a tad of avocado oil and water to soften. Hopefully it'll help some with the side effects Will is feeling, but he isn't entirely sure. After about a 20 minute cooking time, Hannibal comes to the living room with a plate for Will. Usually, Hannibal detests eating anywhere else aside from the kitchen island or the dining room, but this will have to do for now. He sets the plate on the coffee table with an African-sourced leather place mat next to the untouched water or aspirin.

Clicking his tongue in disapproval, he sits at the edge of the couch near Will's hip, shaking Will awake, "William, you haven't taken your medication. You must take it before you eat. Come come, sit up."

Hannibal goes to sit him up, trying to be clinical about it, but Will's skin is hot and soft under clammy clothes. He knows Will would never be able to see his minute reactions but they're there and they make Hannibal uncomfortable with himself. He clears his throat and tries to sit Will up against the arm rest, before reaching for the cool glass and aspirin. Will's head sways for him, and hangs tiredly. He at least makes an effort to reach for the two items but fails all together. With a sigh, showing exasperation on the outside, he leans closer to feed one aspirin after the other before helping Will tip his head back to drink water. Hannibal doesn't mind the sweat and the closeness when he touches the back of his neck, and watches Will's throat swallow everything down. Wanting to find an excuse to touch him again, he places a firm palm to his forehead and the sides of his face, checking temperature. The intimacy is heavy, perhaps only for Hannibal, but that's just fine. It's a secret between Hannibal and himself, reserved for somewhere private in his mind palace.

"You don't have a temperature. I'll have to look at a medical book to see what perhaps might fit the symptoms you are experiencing. I know it seems daunting, but you must also eat. It isn't good for you to go on an empty stomach like this. I hope you like fish." Hannibal says to the young fisherman, a joke in his tone in the quiet of their shared space.

Will would smile if he could, but licks his lip instead with an exhale. Before he even tries to swing himself into a position in front of the steaming plate, Hannibal picks it up and lifts a fork of rice-like substance with a hat of salmon on top for him instead. In any other scenario, Will would have laughed, red-cheeked with so much embarrassment his face would split open, but he can't feel anything but thankfulness for such considerations as Hannibal is taking now. Will clings to such kindness like a lone survivor at sea finally taking root to a shore rock in the dark. He takes all bites being given to him, the flavors dancing across his palette in a never ending waltz, and wonders why the fish his dad quick fries tastes nothing like this. Before he knows it, Will is propping himself up on his elbows all on his own to push himself closer to the plate. He could take the fork from Hannibal and feed himself he bets, but Hannibal seems so focused on the action of feeding him, and Will is so comfortable that he doesn't want to bother trying to change the atmosphere.

"You've nearly eaten it all. I doubt you weren't starving. Good, please rest as long as you'd like. Unfortunately, I do have a couple things to attend to today but I want you here. Stay, and

perhaps when I'm available, you will be well enough to talk," His host says, putting a hand on his thigh like a mother would before leaving.

Will lays back down licking and biting away at stray couscous in his mouth and staring at the clocks hands ticking away. It's 3:45pm and he doesn't remember anything past 12:56pm in the afternoon. His hands tremble so much in his lap that he folds his arms over himself and tucks his hands at his sides. Sleep takes him swiftly after watching the hands for too long, and he dreams of dark forests with a full moon as his audience.

Hannibal puts on his coat and walks by the living room to check on Will. He peeks over the back of the couch, and sees Will slumber away, tucked in on himself. He pulls a throw blanket from the neighboring couch over Will and takes off his shoes, placing them neatly below the coffee table. The second pill he administered is something like a Benadryl that will keep Will's mind quiet and unconscious for some time. By now he knows nobody at home will miss Will's absences for too long so it gives Hannibal plenty of time to visit John Hopkins for a seminar on social exclusions and a brief chat with the Head Councilman afterwards before hurrying home to Will waking for dinner.

Dr. Alana is delighted to see a full audience before her. She has to admit that social exclusions is new in its studies so naturally it draws an academic crowd out of pure intrigue but none the less, a show can only be so interesting as it's host. She shows slides of case files and exemplary patients from the Hopkins Hands-On Hospital Program. They call it the HHH for short.

"So as you can see ladies and gentlemen, given the data we have gathered thus far on social exclusions within an environment polluted with poverty and a large quantity of adolescents, we come to the arrival of an unstable working class, and a spike in crime. In impoverished communities all over the world, they're found to be less involved in political and social climates due to their resources being so depleted whether economically or materially. Stress levels leading to high blood pressures, over stimulated frontal lobes and lowered immune systems."

Alana carries on, and from time to time, amongst the shady faces of the audience her eyes land on a face that sparkles at the eyes like rubies, with hair so neat it almost looks plastic in the midst of the tired and middle-aged peers that fill her space. It's a boy, and he stands out like an uncut strand of grass on a mowed lawn. She tries not to halt her voice or talk to that side of the room for longer than necessary, finding the young face almost off putting. He looks enraptured by her lecture, as if he is a well-rehearsed scholar in the subject and for a reason unknown to her, it startles her. After the lecture, the applause is warmly received, and she gladly shakes the hands of her audience that come to thank or comment on her lecture. Everyone begins to filter out, and when it seems like there are no more interactions to be had, she starts to gather her lecture notes to put them in a maroon Burberry lecture case.

"Dr. Bloom, I must say, your lecture was compelling to say the least. I have yet to see a lecture on social exclusion as throughly investigated as yours. Tying it to the physical effects

of the human body no less—I imagine it will cause quite a stir amongst the academic and practicing communities." A voice, even in tone, but forcibly deeper than what seems natural.

It makes Alana almost jump from her shoes, thinking she had been alone before now. She clears her throat and looks up to see who she is talking to. She blinks and closes the Burberry bag under her hands with a decisive thup when she comes face to face with the boy from the audience earlier.

"Ah, thank you. I hope it does. I grew tired of seeing little to nothing on social exclusion despite how pivotal the topic is to psychology. It's a tactic and a means of new social experimentation—it'll help us better understand criminals, the impoverished, and the younger generations that are being striped of their resources. Are you...a student at John Hopkins? It's rare I get students in my private lectures."

The boy's smile drips with charm and charisma and he steps forward with an outstretched hand, "Excuse my rudeness. My name is Hannibal Lecter, and no, not quite. I plan to join John Hopkins academically sometime later. I'm simply...observing and absorbing currently."

Alana smiles in return, and shakes Lecter's hand. She wants to ask where his parents are but finds it might be incredibly rude and intrusive, "Oh, well, I highly recommend the school if it's amongst your options. Not that my opinion really has any value in the matter as a stranger."

They both laugh lightly, and Dr. Bloom puts the bag over her shoulder beginning to walk to the lecture exit with Lecter at her side, "On the contrary, I value your opinion rather highly. I doubt someone who is completing their second doctorate through Hopkins is doing it because it was her third choice."

There's an eyebrow raise shared between them and Alana's smile is all teeth, impressed by, what she decides then is a boyish-man instead of a mannish-boy. He has to be, she thinks.

"Someone has done their research, that's for sure!" She comments, turning the corner with this Mr. Lecter.

"I apologize, I tend to do that quite often. I had to know what sort of temperament and manner of ambitions you have. I partially lied earlier when I said I wasn't a Hopkins academic. The board allowed me to take seasonal courses through Hopkins in order to adjust myself to the atmosphere. One of them is being taught by you, so naturally..."

"Naturally you went hunting for my lecturers and professional profile. I see I see, well it's a pleasure to meet a future student for my seasonal course, Mr. Lecter."

Lecter bows slightly, "The pleasure be all mine. I did have one question to ask you if it wasn't too much trouble?"

"My class isn't starting for another 15 minutes. Please, ask away," Alana says with a smile, warm and inviting like Hannibal imagines are the kind of smiles she gives her student patients at Manassas High.

“I was wondering what your opinion is on the hypothetical use of social exclusion as a manipulative tool to lower the bar at which a subject might be satiated in their social interactions with others. Perhaps using social exclusion at a milder form to relax a patient instead of further stressing them? Excuse such a loaded question—I’m writing my own article on the topic and was curious if you’d give an unofficial quote.”

The doctor of the two is taken aback at the question all together, “It’s quite alright. I’m use to them...but, that sort of comfortability with isolation would insinuate the patient had undergone extreme forms of social isolation beforehand—depending perhaps on one person at most outside of themselves. The experimentation is highly unethical and dangerous to say the least given its most effective if the patient is unaware of the situation all together as well. It would be without consent.”

Hannibal hums, as if it’s the exact answer he wanted to hear from her, “One would assume that the patient must see the extreme of one end before being reverted to a milder form that may seem normal, and positive. The patient doesn’t need to know that there exists a form that has no social exclusion, merely that there is only a worse one. Interesting. Thank you, doctor. I hope you have a very good class period.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Lecter.” She says hesitantly before parting ways with him in the hall heading to class.

Hannibal walks away from her, his head casually tipped to favor the right side, hands in his pockets with a kick in his step that only he feels as he strides to the mess hall. He promised Dr. Fairview coffee and a small chat before the lecture started. He must play nice with the high heads of John Hopkins if he hopes to get anywhere with taking lecture courses before having graduated high school officially. All dull comparatively to the plans and puzzles he’s mapping out for his dear patient at home.

Will wakes from a heavy slumber with nature calling from a bloated bladder and cramped legs. He sits up, bleary eyed, and without a second thought, gets up to go to the bathroom. He shuffles down the hall in his socks, and looses his sweater somewhere along the way in an attempt to get fresh air against his damp skin. He doesn’t notice the hallway behind him seems to shuffle and change, closing Will off from the living room. Relieving himself in the dark at the bathroom’s toilet, he washes his hands and tries to avoid looking at the mirror. To no avail, he reaches over to dry his hands on a soft, velvet colored hand towel, and his eyes graze the mirror. There, he sees a glimpse of a large shape behind his shoulders pressed up against the wall, watching him. Will’s breath halts in his throat, and he snaps his eyes shut.

“There’s no-nothing there. I didn’t have a nightmare. I don’t see anything behind me. I won’t see anything behind me.”

The clup clup of hooves against bathroom tile echo around him, followed by the disagreeing huff from a wet, stag nose that blows past his curls on the left side. Will’s shoulders scrunch up but he’s frozen in place and can’t seem to stomach the courage to move or open his eyes.

“Pl-please. I don’t want to see.”

There’s another huff and the noise of hooves seems to move away from him in his ears. It’s distant in the hallway and only then does Will let go of the towel he had gripped for dear life. One after the other, his eyes slowly pry open to view a sorry reflection of his pale form. The breath he holds finally leaves him, but his limbs shake with the fear of knowing that he must leave the bathroom. He composes himself and slowly makes his way to the open bathroom door, peering around the frame into the hall way to see the stag make its way around a corner. Gulping against his better judgement, he follows the damn thing in silence because the hallways have changed around him and he can barely hold onto which direction is up.

Whispers come to him from the dull pictures on the walls, they’re endless and repeating yet indecipherable. His imagination pulls the faces and bodies from ones he’s seen on Hannibal’s walls throughout his house. Most are old black and white photos, none look like family nor do any look anything like the photos holed away at the back of Will’s garage that harbor the rare image of him as a baby or the gleaming faces of two smiling, young people he can’t believe were his parents once. He rounds another corner for what feels like the 3rd time and the stag disappears from view. Will assume he’s been led to the back of the house, but he’s met with a dead end. There’s a door with two locks, and no handle that greets him there. Will wonders if it leads to the back yard—he didn’t know Hannibal even had a backyard...He can’t help but shuffle forward and put fingers along the door, as if his prints would magically unlock the door.

Slams from terrified or desperate fists come from the other side. There are please for help and Will jumps out of his skin.

“I’ll try to get help! Hello? Hello? Are you hurt?? How can I get to you?” Will says, voice desperate with worry.

The scream carries on, slamming and slamming against the door. He backs away from the dead end to perhaps go find help, but his body bumps into something freezing. He turns and his eyes meet another’s, and he jumps back against the door. Pressing himself up against it with a high-pitched scream himself, the slamming of fists on the door behind his back match his thudding heart.

“See? See?”

Will shakes his head at this doll like figure— a realistic looking mannequin, with no mouth and an unfinished nose. The doll mechanically shifts forward and continues its mantra through the echoes bouncing off the wall. As it inches closer, Will can tell it’s been frozen and thawed and frozen again, freezer burn building up at the edges of its eyes and anywhere that liquid could pool.

“See? See.”

“I-I don’t! I don’t see! I don’t—I don’t want to see. Leave me alone!!”

Through his fear, he can feel the air turn cold with the smell of pine interlacing with it. The overtones of wet mud or leaves keep the air heavy in his lungs and he can see the moon now.

The hallways escape from under him, and are replaced with mushed, wild salmonberries caught in grassy river bank. He stares up at a black sky, and a lamplight moon. It pulls him in, and his eyes are saucers, staring up at its beauty. He feels the moon's light just as strongly as he would the sun's and he feels powerful then. Will's throat lets out an agonized scream not being able to contain an indescribable feeling of agony in his soul. The mannequin grabs at him and envelopes him in it's frozen limbs of meat. They fall together into the equally black, bottomless stream reflecting the moon's beautiful, pale face and they drown. Will turns to watch the celestial body, rippling in image through the surface of the water above him. His tears are lost to the grand body of water swallowing him and then he wakes in gasps, grasping for something to hold him steady.

He's met with a pair of thin, yet sturdy arms that hold him still. His lungs burn and he feels wet from head to toe. At first, he's confused as to where he is, but as he turns his head slightly, Will realizes he's on the floor, next to the couch. His back aches from being there too long, and his eyes catch on Hannibal's face staring down at him clinically.

"What...?"

"I arrived home to find you on the floor, and when I came to perhaps wake you, you panicked and jolted awake."

Will frowns, and he tries to sit up. His shirt is completely soaked through with sweat and his pants with something else. Realizing that he had indeed wet himself in his sleep, Will begins to scoot away from Hannibal entirely. He flinches from Hannibal's hands and his face is hot with a deep-seeded guilt. He doesn't think he could expel anymore fluids but there are tears welling up at the corners of his eyes anyway from pure disgust or disappointment, perhaps both.

"Will, is this normal? Or frequent?"

"N-no! This has never happ-ened before."

"It's alright, Will. Please stand. I'll lead you to the bathroom. We are different sizes in clothing but perhaps I might have something suitable for you after you've washed off."

Will doesn't want to move from the spot, fearing he'll make even more of a mess, but Hannibal ushers him up and doesn't react outwardly in the slightest.

"Here, I brought you a towel. Remove your clothes and leave them on the ground. I'll go run the bath for you to give you some privacy in the mean time."

"A-are you sure? I can just....g-go...." Will offers, through a runny nose and a broken voice.

"I won't ask again. You can do as you please but I'd prefer you stay. I feel I'm at least entitled to a decent conversation from you after all this, in some equally decent, clean clothing" Hannibal says firmly, agitation poking from underneath the facade.

Will can only nod in response and takes the towel from Hannibal's hands. His host doesn't wait a second after, before curtly walking up stairs to the master bathroom to run the hot

water for him and prepare a set of soaps. Will doesn't think twice when Hannibal leaves to start pulling off all his clothes and using all of it to cover the small puddle left behind, the only other evidence of his dream aside from his sorry existence. He contemplates throwing them out the nearest window or in the trash bin so Hannibal doesn't have to touch anything but the whole scenario is displeasing to say the least anyway.

"Jesus fucking Christ...." He breathes, thinking that he definitely wants to bury himself alive and never be seen again. He seems to feel like that more often now a days.

Hannibal is probably disgusted and so utterly revolted of Will's presence right now. He wants to do nothing more than shrink from being. Maybe hide between the molecules of his own damn urine, it's where he probably belongs anyway. Hannibal comes back, and leads him to the bathroom, not a word shared between them until Will makes it to the bathtub filled with sudsy, steaming water that smells of lemon, rosemary and something sweet.

"Oh...." Will hasn't had a bathtub bath in a long time, and finds it weird to be 14 and doing it now.

He doesn't say anything though, and turns slightly behind him, only to find Hannibal has already gone back down stairs. Will wants to run back down and tell him not to touch his soaked clothes—that he'll deal with it and rush through his bath to do so, but he feels it'd only upset the other more. Closing the door half-heartedly, it being left a jar without another glance, he slips into the tub and sits there to absorb all the heat from the water. Will's muscles relax almost instantly, and his head droops over the lip of the bath, staring at the patterned ceiling.

Downstairs, Hannibal takes two pairs of latex gloves and puts them on one over the other. In all honesty, he is surprised and slightly annoyed by the whole situation but it isn't Will's fault. Hannibal didn't expect to come home just in time to see Will rise from the couch. In usual fashion, Hannibal greeted him warmly but wasn't acknowledged in the slightest. When he went for a closer inspection of Will sitting up on the couch, he found he was still asleep but with his eyes open. His dreams ushered his body to rise and take him down the hall way, Hannibal close behind to spectate. Will went and used the bathroom, unfortunately in the right area of the house but all over himself, before proceeding down the hall in his house to the cellar. He remembers the pins and needles poking at the back of his spine in anxious, suspense as he watches Will put his hands on the cellar door with a subconscious wonder.

"See?" Hannibal asks in quiet, under his breath, his eyes glistening in the dark of the hallway behind Will, waiting and watching. He wonders if Will can feel the fear that lingers in the cellar from the horrid animals he hunted before—wonders if Will can feel the impending fear to reside there.

Will reacts in an instant from being in front of the door, his body turns to Hannibal and seems to be staring right at him. Hannibal doesn't feel fear, but he feels....naked, and alive together with Will in his mind.

"See."

Will's body convulses and he stutters words that are too slurred to make any sense before collapsing on his front and going completely still. Hannibal goes right into action, and drags Will by his arms back to the living room and lays him on the floor so not to ruin the couch. He quickly runs to grab his coat and exit the house, and re enters almost in the same breath. He makes the door opening and closing behind him on his reentry loud and noticeable. It stirs Will from sleep and there's an audible gasp for breath like he's been under water for hours. Hannibal wears a worried look at first, holding Will still as he spurts back to consciousness before him. Will grabs for his arms and shirt and asks him what's happened. Hannibal would have told him the whole truth, but it might spur some concerns on his patient's part that need not ruin the opportunities presented so he tells him a highly edited version instead.

Hannibal is methodical and quiet when he shoves Will's clothes into a trash bag and tosses the entire thing in the trash after cleaning the area. He's sure Will won't mind, they were worn anyway, and the urine and sweat would take ages to come off to a point that Hannibal wouldn't smell even a faint of it. He's decided he would have to buy Will at least one set of clothes to replace the ones he's decided are no good. Now, while his guest bathes, he must go through his wardrobe for something that is as close to...Graham-y as possible, concerning taste. It'll be difficult but he's sure he'll find something. The hunt takes a good 30 minutes or so but Hannibal settles for clothes he finds in an old trunk that he brought from Lithuania from his first stay at the manor that he hid in the downstairs coat closet. The smell of birch woods and apricots still linger on the thin wool and cotton, intermingled with the deep oils of red wood from the inner lining of the trunk. He can't help but take a deep inhale of the clothes, and sighs into them before deciding the scent will pair nicely with a freshly washed Will Graham.

Back in the bathroom upstairs, after a good 10 minutes of soaking, Will perks up from where he is to listen for any movement just outside the door. When he hears nothing, he stands up and wraps a towel around himself in a quick but silent fashion. Creeping across the bathroom, he makes sure to dry himself off as best as possible before entering the master bedroom. He knows it's Hannibals bedroom because it's significantly more lived in than the other places around the house. That's still not saying much with everything still as neat and tidy as a furniture display. Not a stray shoe or piece of clothing in sight like one would find in Will's bedroom. There's a desk made of mahogany wood, with sketches laid atop each other. They are novice pieces of angels and demons battling each other in the name of good and evil for the most part. Will's favorite is the one sketch of a soft and plump woman being seduced by a swan. He doesn't quite understand what's going on mythologically but it's enough to make him huff a laugh at the insinuation.

Looking around at other areas, Will can't help but touch the books and articles neatly stacked at the bed side table or the ornamental figures guarding never-used scotch glasses adorning a small side table near the window next to a satin red sofa chair. As for Hannibal's bed, it's the size of an Egyptian King but drastically lowered. The mattress comes to a comfortable mid-thigh for an adult, and for someone like Will or Hannibal himself, is at waist high or higher. The bed is dressed in nothing but extravagant linens. A goose down comforter, two thin sheets of a contrasting colored bed spread, and then a hand-stitched, patterned duvet cover in a maroon red with golden accents to cover it all. Will presses a hand down on the mattress just to get an idea of what it feels like, but he practically sinks into the whole thing. Before he knows it, he finds himself laying on it and closing his eyes, taking deep inhales of fresh linen

and something else. He's lost in thought when the sudden sound of foot steps climbing steps permeates his brain and alerts him. Before he has a chance to think, his body is up and off the mattress and bolting to the bath water in the bathroom, not closing the door behind him too well.

Hannibal makes his way with the clothes back upstairs, neatly folded in his arms and leaves them on the bed for Will. The only light in the bedroom emanates from the crease of light dripping in from the bathroom door open ajar. Hannibal can see a brown, curled head with a nose and lips peaking up at the ceiling, staring at nothing. He decides to sit quietly on the edge of his bed, watching in the dark, trying to press the image into a room somewhere in his mind palace. Hannibals hand slips from his lap to rest on the mattress under him and notices instantly that the duvet is damp.

It surprises him slightly, and at first, he's furious to think there could be a leak in his ceiling. He looks up and despite the dark, doesn't notice a single spot of water damage. Hannibal looks back down to the damp spot, and presses his face to it. It smells of lemon, rosemary and a tiny bit of Belgian rock sugar. He smiles into the fabric thinking what a cheeky and odd boy Will really is. He imagines Will snooped around his room while he was down stairs and touched all of his things. The thought excites him as he imagines finding remnants of this curious creature days or weeks from now, pulling him back into this very moment.

Pleased, he goes to knock gently on the opened door. There's no movement, but there's an auditory approval of entry akin to a grumble. He enters and sees warmed skin, and damp hair ends. Their eyes do not meet but Will is completely relaxed, hiding under a mound of bath suds and taking in deep inhales.

"Comfortable?"

"I haven't taken a kids bath in forever...."

"I would say the same if I called them kids baths to."

Will smiles. It's one Hannibal thinks at this point is reserved for him only and it makes his hairs stand on end at the back of his neck, he rarely smiles anywhere else he imagines.

"Alright then what do you call them?"

"I usually refer to them as herbal soaks. After all the Ancient Romans—"

"Yeesh, okay, Grandma Gretchen. When's the next bingo game?" Will snaps playfully as an arm snakes out of the hot water to line the rim of the tub.

Hannibal pauses, blinking down at Will's casual form not understanding the joke. He shakes his head and pulls a stool up half as tall as the tub, and sits behind Will's upturned skull. He would say he doesn't quite understand but he decides against it, "You haven't washed your hair yet and you've been in there for more than 30 minutes. May I?"

"May you what? Wash my hair?" Will deliberates on the question, he doesn't really like being touched because he's not use to anything more than a good back pat or a hard swat

from the back of a calloused hand, but for some reason, he feels he might not mind it so much if it's coming from Hannibal Lecter.

"Uh...s-sure. I guess. I was getting to it, I just..." His voice trails off as his shoulders sink below the water, accepting the offer.

Hannibal only nods, despite knowing Will wouldn't see his agreement, before squeezing a quarter-sized amount of a delicate fragranced almond milk, fig oil and honey lather on to his hand. His sleeves are rolled passed his elbows and with one hand, scoops water into his palm to sprinkle it over Will's hair to better shampoo the large amount of curls. Hannibal is firm but gentle and thorough in his washing. He massages Will's scalp in the same way his mother use to, all fingers and soothing circular motions that could put any toddler to sleep in the tub. Between the soft mattress in the master bedroom and the skull massages, Will has never experienced such satisfying pleasures at once until now and despite having slept for eons, he could fall asleep were he sits right now . A hum escapes him and his head tilts forward easily when Hannibal motions him to, so he can scrub the hair around his ears and nape of the neck.

Hannibal wears a smug smirk. He takes the time to remember each motion to the scalp that loosens another muscle in Will's shoulders or back. They're both quiet aside from the occasional slosh of water, and the squish from soap being slotted around a thick bed of brown hair. Will hugs his knees at some point, resting his cheek on the table of his knees and arms.

"This is weird, huh?"

"What is?" Hannibal asks intern.

"This. This whole thing. Our...friendship...you...and me being here...My dreams...Everything."

"I'm pleased you think we are friends."

"Wouldn't it be even weirder if we weren't?"

"Only if you say so."

Will doesn't know what to say to that. He leaves the conversation to drown.

"Tell me about your weird dreams. You said earlier that none that occurred whilst you slept had happened before, what was so different this time?"

By now, Will is sort of use to telling Hannibal things he'd never told anyone else. Hannibal has this talent for listening a great deal, absorbing every word and rearranging or digesting the conversation to give something back to Will he never would have dreamed possible. He'd never tell Hannibal, but he compares him to the Devil who spins gold by transforming Will's words into revelations in the form of mystifying metaphors. Will wants to know what sort of values he has to exchange for such gifts such as the ones Hannibal tends to give.

"In my dream I had woke up and I was on the couch...You hadn't come home yet or at least I didn't see any sign of you. I got up to go to the bathroom and..."

Will squeezes his calves trying to remember clearly what he had seen and done in his own mind scape, "...I went to the bathroom and saw a shadow of something. I got scared, so I didn't look at it. I closed my eyes and felt fur, the huff of breath against my ear and then it was gone. A stag has been walking around in my dreams...I think it tries to guide me somewhere but I never know where...I follow it in my dreams always. I don't know why."

"Has it ever hurt you?"

"Never. It just watches me, and guides me to new places I've never been before."

"Where did it take you today?"

"I was at the back of this house...There's a door and screaming. I tried to talk to it but it didn't hear me. I went to go get help but something was behind me."

Will takes a sharp inhale remembering the glass eyes, shining in the dark, and asking him if he sees. See? See. Will can practically feel the icy rock flesh against his back instead of a porcelain bath. He continues retelling his dream.

"It asks me if I can see. It kept asking me that. Its voice bounced off the walls like an never ending echo. Before I knew it, the hallway disappeared and I was outside. The moon was there watching us. I felt this—this horrible pain inside, like a wallowing guilt. I regretted being alive and I-i screamed at the moon. I screamed to be saved...from I don't know what. I'm brought to his safe space. My dream gave me an idea where the...the Geppetto Killer might be taking these girls. There were salmonberries and a river in a forest. It smelled moist and the river ran right through a clearing. To me, it seems like the perfect place to-to take them. I could...kill them there, under the moon and bathe in the river like a baptism. The pain from being remade over and over again, and never looking any different....but that one moment....one moment in moonlight, where god can see me as who I really am, makes it worth it. I wake up from the dream feeling like I had been drowning."

Hannibal absent-mindedly massages Will's hair, thinking about Will's dream. It's intriguing and thrilling to hear the things Will says. He wants to ask him a million questions, perhaps wrestle him until he's submerged under water in the midst of it all, drowning like he was in his dream. He wonders what Will would see in his fight to really survive for another breath of air. If he isn't strong, he can cut him open and take thin slices of his fear-sweetened brain, lightly fried in oil and sauerkraut over a bitter-sweet coleslaw and German white bread. He didn't realize he was hungry until just that moment...

Will pulls himself up from a slouching position, tilting his head away from Hannibal's hands. He turns to look at Hannibal for the first time since after making it up the stairs.

"I-I sound crazy don't I? I didn't mean the things I said—it's just—"

The boy with burning bejeweled eye sockets, stares at this wave of chaos from the sea. His salt speckled blue eyes shimmer with a delicate fear of being rejected in some way by the older of the two.

“You have the confidence to confide such streams of thought and subconscious experiences with me. As your...friend, I will tell you they are not normal dreams or thoughts but they are yours, and yours alone. That still makes them special, and beautiful in their own way. I can see that. Can you?”

“I don’t know what I see quite honestly.”

“But you know how you feel? How do you feel?”

Will turns away, gripping the rim of the tub as he slowly sinks into the water to wash off, “...Lost.”

Nothing much is said between the two of them after that. When Will is given privacy to step out of the shower, and then meets Hannibal in the main bedroom, he’s greeted by a warm set of clothes. He’s surprised by the clothes handed to him. Hannibal seems pleased with himself and enjoys his companion’s awe at being given a country styled button down, almost a perfect fit for Will, made of a thicker, yellow cotton that pairs with forest green, tweed pants. Despite Hannibal’s distaste for it and it’s popularity as a fashion fad currently, Will cuffs the pants so he doesn’t rub the hem on the flooring. Hannibal mentions tucking in the shirt no less than four times to Will as they chatter about miscellaneous, small topics and with an automatic sigh, Will tucks in the damn shirt. Hannibal swears it’s better for him to at least tuck the shirt in, and wear a modest, Swiss leather belt that pairs nicely with the outfit. The other, being persuaded into an entire outfit couldn’t say no after having so much generosity thrown at him, so he does as he’s told and takes one look in the mirror afterwards. The fussing, he wasn’t accustomed to and it almost annoyed him, but the image that looked back at him made him still himself.

“Do you like it? I think it suits you.” Hannibal comments, folding his arms and staring at Will’s back and his mirror reflection, watching for any give in his own expression whilst watching Will’s.

“I don’t dislike it? I....” Words fall away from him.

“That’s a start. You look how you should rightfully be perceived.”

“How’s that?”

“I probably shouldn’t be answering all the questions around here. Some answers must manifest on their own and in time. My aunt use to tell me that.”

“Your aunt sounds wise.”

“She is.”

“W...where is she?” Will has to ask, purely because the only adult he’s seen around the house is the live in maid who is always either just leaving, or makes it a point to leave their vicinity, and sometimes, catches the chef that Hannibal is fond of. He’s never seen anyone else, much less another family member.

Hannibal clears his throat, “She’s in Lithuania taking care of family matters there. I had to go on without her in order to not hinder my education.”

“What about your mom and dad?” Will presses on, walking around his host to look at books on the wall as if he hadn’t just snooped at several of them earlier in the evening.

“...They are no longer with us. I’m the sole heir to the Lecter estate with my Aunt as my current guardian.”

Will stops midway through pulling a book from its snug home on the second shelf. He doesn’t look at Hannibal, but suddenly he realizes that his host really has been alone. That this illusion of wanted isolation and professionalism wasn’t a choice to begin with. Hannibal’s life was empty of life outside from his own or hired help because it was ripped from under his feet. He fills his time with loving care to art and literature that give him tears, passion, anger and revelation much like the emotions spawned between kin that are long gone now.

“Your alone here in Baltimore. You weren’t kidding back at the market when you said you were alone in a new city,” Turning then, just in time to see Hannibal nod solemnly.

Will feels suddenly guilty for the numerous times he assumed anything about Hannibal’s background or his family. A ball of nerves, like charring coal, is swallowed as he finally turns to Hannibal, who is staring at him. Unfortunately, guilt burrows ever deeper in his chest as he contemplates whether the thought of loving parents, murdered by life, and remembered fondly makes him more jealous than parents that are acutely attentive of Hannibal’s well being despite their absence from his life. He ponders this and then immediately regrets such selfish trains of thought.

“Im sorry.” Will says before he even thinks.

Hannibal isn’t quite sure what Will is sorry for, knowing Will would never say something so dull as a meaningless condolence. Hannibal wants to assume it means more than just an apology for parents long in the ground, bullets suspended in dirt and bone rather than in the warm, red flesh of winter withered bodies.

“As am I.”

“I didn’t mean to bring it up.” Will had just started liking the idea of two boys neglected by their parents and the ability to bond over such a stupid thing, rich or poor. But it’s another thing that divides them and he can’t help but feel like he has to reach into the dark of this boy’s past, present and future to find another thing that makes them relatable to each other. He was just starting to get comfortable, and a new fear has sprung forth from the flames—that perhaps his ability to reach for someone else really is an impossible task.

“It’s something I expected was going to arise in conversation. You’re interests are...shall I dare say, peaked? And now, you’re more curious. It’s only natural.” Hannibal’s tone is rather taunting and teasing. Will’s nose scrunches and his nerves go steely finding he feels a tinge of deja vu happening between them as they converse.

“I thought the common practice was to thoroughly inspect a product before purchasing it. An expensive product, you look at it’s origins to usually. Or do you just buy things because they look expensive?” Will says pensively, not intending to be offensive, and yet, his comment comes out prickly anyway.

Hannibal chuckles then, full grin and eyes narrowed in a particular glee that only a sadist finds in poking at a rattling snake, “You have a point. And no, of course not. I’m quite informed before making any sort of purchase. You know, if you were anyone else, I would find that remark an insulting insinuation. Consider yourself lucky.”

Will, knowing it all to be playful can’t help but feel a tingle in his spine as if it was a very heavily veiled threat. He laughs it off lightly, but makes sure that Hannibal walks down the steps to the living first.

End Notes

I write from my phone. I try my best to edit it but it’s slightly difficult the way it’s set up on mobile. Hope you like it!

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